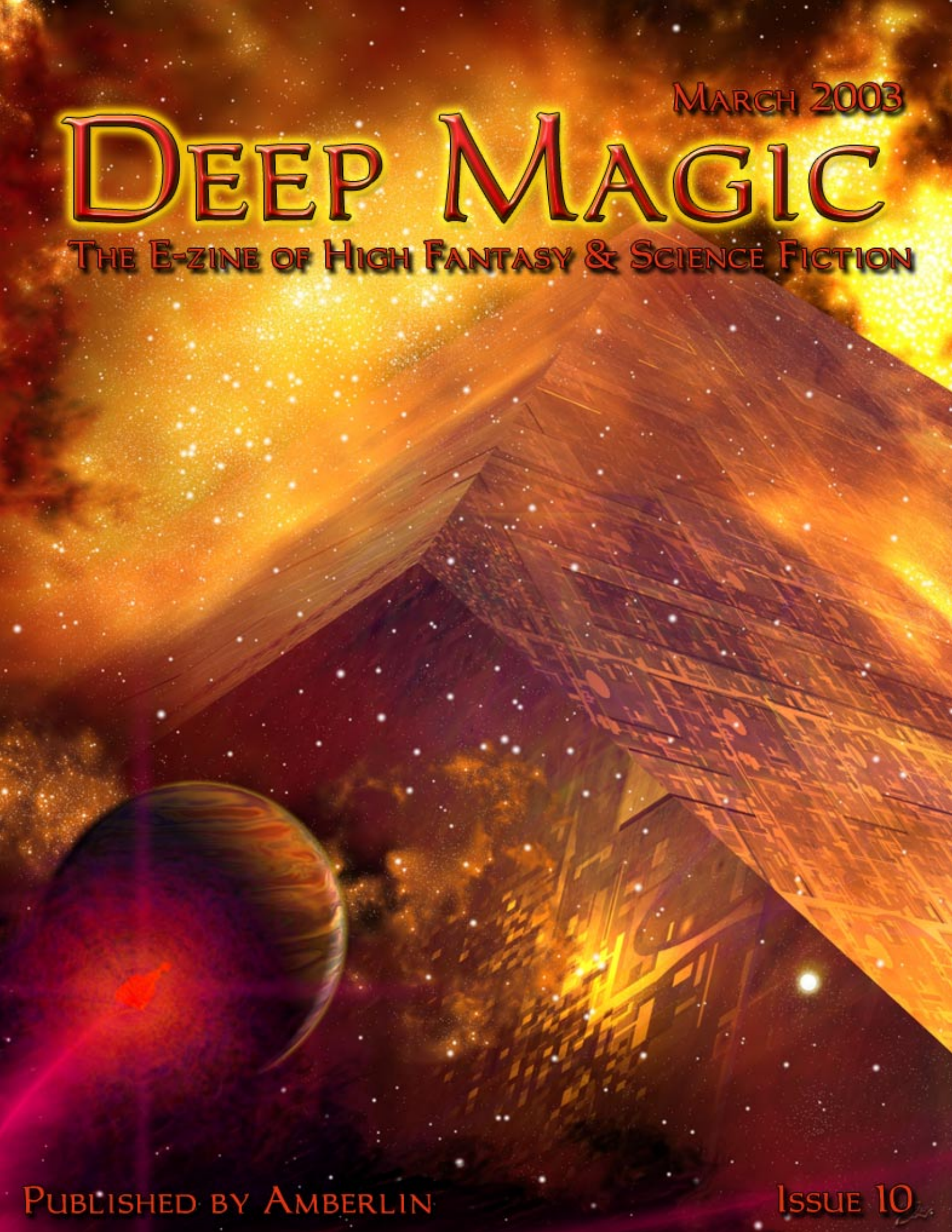
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"*Polyphemus*"

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Note from the Editors

March 2003

Welcome back for another fix of your favorite legal addiction, Deep Magic. With this issue, we'd like to explore the science fiction genre more than we have in the past.

After a hiatus, we bring back the O.R. Savage novel *Procyx* and introduce Book 2 of this work. In this universe, a deadly phenomenon called hypermotility has been randomly destroying star systems. Is it caused by a mysterious blue star called Procyx or something even more sinister? In Book 2, you'll fly by white drive through a universe rife with mysteries and legends. If you did not follow this serialized novel when it launched back in July 2002, you might want to take a peek in those past issues to catch up. And special thanks to cover artist Reuben Fox for capturing a scene out of the novel – the arrival at Polyphemus.

In addition to the new novel, we bring some new authors as well. Welcome to Mark Reeder, author of *Prometheus' Tears*, a great sci-fi tale taking us to a far-away moon. We also welcome Ays Marin with her futuristic mafia story *Oranges and Lemons*. Then for the fantasy fans, we introduce the talented Clover Autrey and a compelling story about sickness and dragons -- *Jase's Challenge*.

Tears of Minya continues for a third month, taking you deeper into this city of intrigue as the plots begin to converge. Then staff editor M. Thomas brings us a quick-witted diatribe about how to paint villains into your stories. For those of you who have enjoyed M. Thomas' short stories (*Slaying the Dragon* and *Magic Chicken*) and articles, watch for her serialized novel *Found Things* –starting up next month!

In this issue, we'll also bring you an article by our not-so-quick-whitted, favorite chief editor Dimwhit, Jeremy Whitted as he takes you on a technical journey on preparing a manuscript for publication. Not the editing, folks, the actual typesetting and interior design. If nothing else puts you to sleep this month, this certainly will. Jeremy will talk about how we are taking our first serialized novel, *Landmoor*, and preparing it for publication for all of you, our loyal readers.

And now – a request for all of you, our readers. This e-zine has enjoyed tremendous growth since we launched in June. But we would like to *double* our subscriptions (which are free, after all) in just one month. If all of you get one friend to subscribe, we can do that and continue to spread a little Deep Magic across the planet. Take a minute now to send a friend our URL: www.deep-magic.net. The 'Subscribe' button is on the left.

**Bonus points go to the reader who can get someone currently living in Wales to subscribe. We know you can do it.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Writing Challenge

We have a fun challenge this month, so read below, and read it carefully. You should enjoy it. Send us your submissions by the 20th to writingchallenge@amberlin.com. For last month, the selections we have chosen to publish are:

Seaborn by A.M. Stickel
A Prayer of Peace by McKenna Foster

We also want to mention that writing challenge submissions are rarely edited by our staff. These submissions are exercises and not meant to be polished.

March 2003 Writing Challenge

In "A Knight's Tale," the imposter knight's scribe happens to have a horrendous gambling problem… also, his name happens to be Chaucer. In a memorable scene, Chaucer's gambling problems have caught up to him and his "lenders" abusively collect on the debt by stripping him naked. Chaucer replies that they could enjoy the moment because he would see his revenge by eviscerating them in literature.

Those of us (editors and readers alike) who dabble in writing fiction might have had similar feelings toward one person or another who has crossed our paths. For at least one of the editors of this e-zine, an obnoxious history professor made his way into a novel as an obnoxious mule. It made the author feel better. Conversely, we might have come across someone who impressed us so much that we patterned a hero or other noble person in our writing after her.

The challenge this month is to exact literary revenge upon an individual you would love to eviscerate. Or, celebrate the nobility you find in a friend by weaving him into a scene. One word of caution: please do not name names, and keep the resemblance sufficiently generic that you do not risk a libel suit in this exercise. Feel free to add a note to the end to explain your motivation. Please keep your submissions under 500.

February 2003 Writing Challenge: Romance and true love hold a certain appeal for many fantasy and sci-fi fans. In some films or literature, a romantic relationship is portrayed in a very heavy-handed manner. All of you who enjoyed the latest Star Wars movie might have missed the Anakin/Padme schmaltz. But heavy-handed or subtle, readers and audiences seem to tolerate love themes in this genre. So being the month of St. Valentines Day, we issue a new writing challenge. Weave a little love into your piece. It could be dialogue between two characters while trapped in the Evil Overlord's domain. A moment of flirting in a deep space asteroid. We won't limit the type of love you choose (platonic, romantic, best friends, etc.) but be sure it's appropriate for Deep Magic. And a hint: subtlety usually works better than gushing. Try to remember that next time George.

SEABORN

A.M. Stickel

As I stand watch this night over his pyreship, I recall the night I wed Hralgarssen's Ingrid. Deep in our cups, we men lay upon the benches, and he drew me close. I lent him my ear, although I would have preferred to join my bride in our marriage bed.

"Like my dear departed Gerda, who wed me anyway, you're wondering why I build long ships, but never go a-viking, eh, Erik?" asked my father-in-law, resting his massive head on his mighty arm. I was a straw man next to his bulk.

"I've been puzzled by it, Helge," I replied, "and your going by your mother's surname."

"You see my shield hanging on the wall with the rest?" said he. "Note the figures upon it, carved there by my father, Nomanssen."

Looking up, I noted a woman with a fish's tail, a man who was a horse from the hips down, a trident raised above and a heart between them. Although the shields of others faded, Helge Hralgarssen's stayed bright as if freshly painted.

"Odd name, Nomanssen," I murmured, trying not to give offense.

"He never wed my mother, Ingrid, and died the night I was born," growled Helge. "The sea claimed him and would claim me should I test it. Birthing me killed my mother. The only history I have is what she told the midwife before her own life flickered out. So you must ward Ingrid, named for my mother, when her time comes upon her. Heed what I'm about to tell you." Helge gripped my wrist in his iron fist until I nodded assent. "She's taking a chance, as did her mother and mine before her."

"Father called himself Seaborn Nomanssen," said Helge, "and with good reason. He revealed his origins to Ingrid the night he got her with child, and swore her to secrecy. While she lay in childbed, lightning struck his ship as he pulled out to sea. But it was such a lightning that all hands aboard were consumed in fire before they could jump to safety. My mother heard the hopeless cries of those ashore above her own. 'Twas then she told the midwife Seaborn's truth, and why he dared not stay for her delivery."

We paused for mead to sweeten our mood, until I nodded for him to continue. "Seaborn's nameless mother was washed ashore by a fierce gale, and lay helpless in a pile of kelp, too weak to crawl back to the sea. She heard hooves popping kelp floats, then felt strong arms lift her. The tang of man and horse sweat mingled as she rested against his heart. He took her to a forest pond, nursed her back to health, and somehow gave her twins. Out of their love came Seaborn and a horse thing with a fish's head."

"What became of that other?" I asked, shuddering now that I understood.

"I know not," he replied, "nor do I know who would. Mayhap we'll learn in Valhalla."

A Prayer of Peace

By McKenna Foster

Prince Archard of Torryen fidgeted as he knelt on the padded pew rung, hands clasped and aiming to the heavens. A coil of golden rope woven through itched against his fingers. Sweat trickled down his cheek and he longed to scrub it away. Would the gout-ridden, longwinded priest never stop praying?

"…And may the gods of the Three Celestiels shine upon good king Abterus as he prepares his mighty hosts for war with the Westerness. May the drums ring clear, may our swords touch thy heavens, may the…"

"If he doesn't stop soon, I'm going to drown in my own sweat," Archard whispered to Garon Billet.

Garon, the Gentleman of his Chamber, sniggered circumspectly. "I've got to use the privy myself. This could get ugly if he drones on much longer."

"My knees, by the gods! The war could be over before he's done. Go choke him with his stole…make him stop."

"Sshhh!!" came the sharp hiss from his mother, her eyes full of daggers.

Archard risked a look Garon and nearly split himself when he saw him mimicking her. He started to laugh and then choked, drawing a few more stares his way. Going to church three times a day was onerous enough for a fifteen year-old. Add a scorching midsummer day and a looming war with Westerness – *would the man never finish his prayer? Angels of Death and blackberry tarts, it was long enough!*

Unable to use his fingers, since they were tied with the prayer knot, Archard leaned forward and scraped his cheek with his thumbs. His mind wandered as he glanced around the congregation, all kneeling in supplication. Some old countess was snoring into her bosoms. The marquis of Lyonair's boy was seeing how far he could stuff the end of the prayer rope up his nose.

Archard snickered again and looked the other way, afraid his spleen would rupture. It was a hot day. He'd rather be hawking. He'd rather be doing anything else.

That's when he saw her.

He bumped Garon's elbow. "Who in the Three Celestiels is that? Kneeling across the aisle. Over there…can't you see her?"

"The commoner?"

"Obviously she's a commoner, but who is she? I've seen everyone in this chapel a thousand times since I was five."

"As if you were paying attention at that age. You still don't…your highness."

"Garon, I'm serious! Do you know her?"

"No. She is managing to keep still though, unlike your lordship. Maybe she's planning to take vows with the church?"

He felt his cheeks scorch with flame as he stared at her. She had light brown hair, like creamy honey, that fell part way down her back. She looked to be about his own age.

"Find out who she is, Garon."

"While he's still praying, my lord? Isn't that sacrilegious?"

"I mean after!" he seethed. *Is she listening to the prayer? She can't possibly be…is she?* She wore a simple dress the color of ripening plums with simple white lace around the collar and cuffs, not eye-grabbing patterns with ropes of jewels or festoons. Just a long line of buttons down the back. A very long line of buttons. He swallowed, feeling his cheeks flame even more. His mouth went dry.

"Find out who she is, Garon."

* * *

"Just a commoner, my lord. Paixe Soubyran. Her father is from our land, though he moved to Potu when his wife died." Garon yawned. "Your sister knows her…they used to play together as children. She's sixteen, a year your senior."

Archard scratched his hair. "Paixe. A Flentish word. It means 'peace'."

"Ironic, isn't it?"

"It's funny, but I do vaguely remember her. That was many years ago. She was just a little girl back then. She wore the same dress at prayers this evening too." He adjusted the candelabra on the table top and gave Garon a sidelong look. "Do you know what I'm thinking, Garon? You usually do."

Garon leaned back against the bedpost and shook out the prince's jerkin before shrugging. "You're going to war in a fortnight after all. I can imagine that your thoughts are straying to a different kind of hunt than you're used to."

"Would you arrange it for me?" Archard's chest constricted. He swallowed. "I'm the Prince of Torryen."

"I'm sure she'll be flattered. They usually are, " he added with a drawl. "I'll approach her after tomorrow night's prayers. Circumspectly, of course."

"Thank you, Garon. I don't think I'll be able to sleep at all. Is that not strange?"

"A common ailment, actually. Where's the wine?"

"Haven't you ever been in love, Garon?"

His friend laughed out loud. "Love, your grace? You think you love the girl?"

"Why are you laughing at me? Have I ever done this before?"

"You mean acted like splay-legged mule? On many occasions…"

"For a woman, Garon? For a woman?"

"She's a girl. You're a boy. When I was your age…"

"By the Three Celestials, Garon, you're only eighteen yourself! If I'm of an age to fight the Westerness, then by my blood I can…"

Garon folded the jerkin and broke out laughing again. "You should listen to yourself. You sound like you're but twelve, not fifteen. I'll approach the damsel for you, your grace. And I'll even woo her for you in the name of love if that is your desire. But I can tell you, quite certainly, that it is not the sentiment you are feeling."

"And how would you know, Garon?" Archard said, seething. "I'm not a child."

"Then stop acting like one, my lord." He examined the jerkin closely. "Oh dear, a gravy stain. She probably spotted it from across the chapel."

"Really?" Archard said, his face flaming with humiliation.

Garon smirked and showed him the clean fabric. "I'm only jesting. Vain and fastidious as ever, my lord. Do you require anything else before I retire?"

"Your resignation. You are so impertinent, Garon."

"Happily. But not 'ere tomorrow night though?"

"Get out!"

* * *

Archard paced his chambers. He wheeled around and watched the wax dripping down the candles. How long could it possibly take? Prayers had ended an hour ago and Garon slipped away as soon as the last round of *amens* were said. She had worn a pretty gown that night – one that matched the summer wheat. By the gods, he was getting maudlin! The servants had trays of sweet meats and pastries ready on silver trays. Three bottles of wines from father's favorite cellars – Garon had insisted on one for himself for performing the service – and a special sugary delight called *dantielle* waited under a chafing dish.

The chamber door squeaked.

Archard steadied himself, trying to seem poised, as if he had done this countless times. His hand trembled. He clenched it. If facing the Westerness was half as fearful as this, he thought he would acquit himself well on the battlefields of northern Torryen.

Gabon entered alone.

"Well?"

The Gentleman of his Chamber shut the door behind him. And then shrugged.

"If this is another one of your pranks, Gabon, I swear it's not to my liking."

"No, my lord." He seemed dazed. "I need a drink."

"Where's the girl, you fool! Did mother see you talking to her?"

"Give me some credit, your highness. We were quite alone. It's just that…well…she said no, my lord."

Something sharp stabbed Archard inside. "What?"

"I don't believe I stuttered that badly. She said no."

"What did you say to her?"

Gabon shrugged. "Nothing vile. I took her aside and…how shall I put this…acquainted her with your intentions and invited her to the manor house."

"And what did she say?" He felt the room lurch and planted his hand on the table to steady himself.

Gabon swallowed meekly. "Ahem. Well. She said that she did not believe that so dashing a Prince as yourself…yes, she used the word 'dashing'…could ever be in love with such a plain and simple girl as herself. She pointed out, and truthfully I might add, that there were much prettier girls in your realm of your own noble blood."

"She said this?"

"There's more."

"Oh dear."

"And she…she said that I was making it up in an attempt to woo her for myself and that she didn't believe you had sent me. She is a pretty thing, your grace. You've always had an eye for beauty."

Archard's mouth gaped open. "But I…"

"I know."

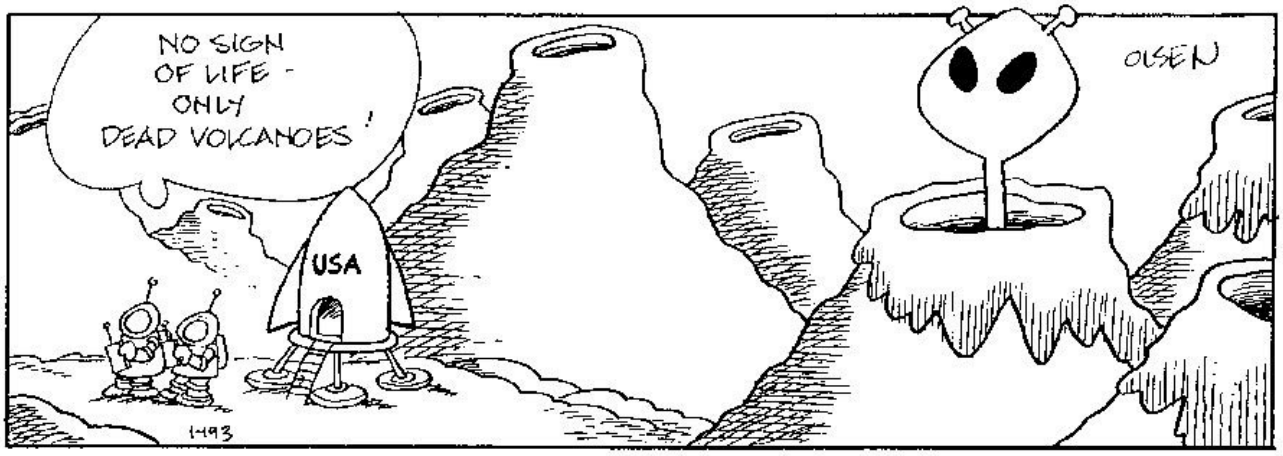
"But she…"

Gabon shrugged. "Good night, my lord."

Archard did not remember hearing him leave or the door shut. Something broke inside him. Grabbing a quill from his desk and a sheet of paper, he started to write.

Fun In Space

A few months ago, we put out a challenge for comic strip submission. Well, someone took us up on it, so we decided to publish a few strips of *Fun In Space*. We hope you enjoy it.



Poll: Deep Magic Questionnaire

Another month, another poll. Last month's poll didn't exactly break any records for number of votes cast, but it was still fun to watch. Every couple received at least one vote, and most were equally liked.

This month's poll is more of a questionnaire. How, where, and why do you read Deep Magic? These are the questions editors yearn to have answered. So please take a minute to go to the website and cast your opinions.

On another note, Deep Magic welcomes your suggestions for future polls. Go to our Message Boards and give us your suggestions for the poll of your choice.

Go to the website and vote!

Final Results: The Best Fantasy/SciFi Couple (as of Feb 26, 2003)

1. Aragorn & Arwen 19.51%%
2. Rand & Elayne/Min/Aviendha 14.63%
3. Garion & Ce'Nedra 12.20%
3. Wesley & Buttercup 12.20%
3. Other 12.20%
6. Arthur & Gwynevere (or Lancelot & Gwynevere 9.76%
7. Taran & Eilonwy 7.32%
8. Han Solo & Princess Leia 4.88%
8. Fitzchivalry & Molly 4.88%
10. Mad Mardigan & Sorcha 2.44%

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

Oranges and Lemons
By Ays Marin

There they were, watching her. Anyette Delinqui studied the three men through her tinted khaki-grey glasses – not fashion, but sufficient for her purposes, as they hid her eyes – and tried to appear disinterested. Her food no longer held the attraction it had when she first sat down to order.

One of the men looked up, dark-haired and handsome; Anyette slid her gaze away, unwilling to clue him into her observation. When a waiter swirled by in his skirts full of red, the man looked away-- but with the pointed attention of someone who knew. He spoke to one of his comrades, words lost in the din of customers and the rioting din of open cook spots.

Were the men fans, mistaken into believing they had spotted their goddess Brazamissio? But not one bore the air of groupies; they were fashionable, clothed in ridiculously wide-sleeved jackets, finely tailored with buttons that changed faces and colours with each passing moment. Two had close-cropped hair bleached white, all had eyes invisible behind shades wider than her own. A tattoo writhed luminescent blue on the cheek of the broader white-haired man, while the dark man had gentile features and fine hands. Their gestures, their faces, were confident. Few were farther from the verge of swooning.

A head passed below her vision, ice–white hair and a mottling of blue. Fear clambered into Anyette's mind. No denying pursuit now.

No, not fans. Something else.

They had followed her in from the street. Anyette considered the crescent of salad on her plate, untouched spinach, chopped beets, and capers draped in orange juice. She waited for a party of nine to wander past before striking the button that would call her waiter. She couldn't stop the men from seeing her pay, but at least they wouldn't have their bill paid when she did.

Despite the crowds, it wasn't an unduly busy day for the Café; her waiter came promptly, red skirts swishing. Anyette had her card ready to rush through the grooved band on his wrist. A tip would have been impolite – the Café Unbelief was too ritzy to point out its monetary concerns – so she added none when he flipped up the top of the register so she could confirm payment.

Naked shrimp screamed in their oil bath. Anyette twisted her shawl around her elbows and left the dining nest before any of the three men could rise from their seats. Entertainment screens, suspended at a sharp angle from the ceiling, writhed as movie action girl Brazamissio undulated through her latest hit; white hair, olive skin, explosions and not much else. Automatically, Anyette checked her cloche hat for loose hairs. Coals hissed in the cooking pits below as she scurried down a railed bridge to the lobby, past the hostess into the street.

A subway station stared across the way from her, blinking neon. The hot smog of evening choking her breath, Anyette cast quick glances in all directions before stalking through grid-locked taxi traffic. A voice whispered in her head-- *make haste*. A glimpse over her shoulder showed no pursuit, but it was hard to see anything through the net of yellow-topped vehicles.

Snapping her pass at the waiting pay machine, Anyette boarded the first disconsolate but rapidly filling train she passed. Green line; it would stop within ten blocks of her studio appointment.

Click here to continue on page 25

Notes About Villains, For Writers Who May Not Know One

By M. Thomas

Amadogwa rode, resplendent, at the forefront of his evil army. His black cloak snapped dramatically in the wind. He raised his sword and shouted, "Let all who defy the Mighty Amadogwa die a horrible dea-rgh-grrr."

That was all he managed to say before the hero's arrow, sent from some hidden place nearby, went in one side of his neck and came out the other.

Hmmm. Rewind film.

Amadogwa rode, resplendent, safely within the *midst* of his army. In armor. On a tall horse. Also with armor. He raised his sword.

At which point the captured princess, forced to ride behind him as added protection against arrows, stabbed him in his unprotected armpit with the sharpened end of a spoon.

Poor old villain. Just can't get a break. Or usually gets several from the hero, no matter how carefully he's designed his master plan. The problem is villains must be defeated. It's no good having a story where the villain gets away with things. Then all you've got is an odd plot twist that people will probably complain about.

This is the reigning truth and eternal frustration of the fantasy writer. THE VILLAIN MUST BE DEFEATED. But gone are the days when the villain could just be stupid. Gone are the days, perhaps, when prophecy was the theological band-aid over the festering wound of evil. They must be defeated. But they can't be stupid, nor even have stupid underlings anymore. Villains don't have the luxury of killing off their lieutenants just because the lieutenant argues with the master plan. Good lieutenants are hard to come by. So are evil soldiers. A villain can't just run around stabbing people because they displease him. Men cost money.

Villains don't have the luxury of killing off their lieutenants just because the lieutenant argues with the master plan. Good lieutenants are hard to come by.

What's a fantasy writer to do?

First, let's get some of the normal pitfalls out of the way.

A villain should know his or her territory. There really shouldn't be any conveniently unmanned secret passageways in the villain's castle, unless he's just moved in. And there probably shouldn't be any handy secret coves along the coast that only the pirates know about. For one thing, one would expect the villain to get on well with pirates. For another thing, any villain worth their salt should have people out roaming the land, looking for just such things. Maybe even offering rewards. How is it that villains, who often have evil birds and bats as their eyes, never manage to see the hidden valley where a thousand troops lie in wait to storm the castle? He's got them all befuddled looking for the hero, that's how. He should be telling the evil birds and bats, "look for a

lot of men who don't wear the same kind of uniform we do. Oh, and if you see this fellow with the magical sword, well, you might just mention that too." Don't let your villain be so focused on one man that he forgets the thousand hiding in the bushes just over the hill.

Another problem with villains is that they talk too much. Some villain is always revealing the genius of his master plan just when he thinks he's got the hero at a disadvantage. Got your hero down on the ground? Good time to go into a lengthy diatribe of your childhood and how it all led up to this one moment of accomplishment, how proud mom's going to be, how everyone will suffer, how the hero played into your trap the whole time (standard villain's bluff), and then *whammo*. The villain has expeditiously forgotten that heroes always bring friends. And friends creep up from behind because; since they aren't the hero, that's what they're supposed to do. If you're going to have your villain confront the hero, I suggest he bring along ten good men to watch his back. That way the faithful friend is otherwise engaged, and the hero and the villain will just have to have a good slash-and-dash to determine the winner. The villain will lose, of course, but not for lack of a good team effort.

Also, villains should know how to use their magic. I've had just about enough of stupid villains who, no matter how many times they've been warned, go ahead and try the forbidden spell anyway. This also falls under the topic of "villains shouldn't be too arrogant." A villain should be smart enough to know that when his evil tutor says, "I'm about to show you a forbidden spell," then disappears in a puff of smoke, there's probably a very good reason it's forbidden. Now, if the hero overwhelms the villain with his own magic, that's okay. But none of this, "I just happen to have a reflective shield on hand to deflect your spell," nonsense either. Villains should be aware of that trick, being predictably vain. When was the last time you bought a new shirt without looking at it in the mirror? Don't try to tell me those villains haven't practiced all that hand-waving in front of a nice reflective surface and learned from their mistakes.

Villains should never leave the most important elements of their plans to the mercy of solar eclipses, mystical conjunctions, or important dates and times. They should always have a back-up. Something along the lines of, "okay, just *in case* the solar eclipse mesmerizes my evil henchmen for ten minutes despite all the warnings I've given them, then we'll throw boiling pitch on people." Villains don't take enough advantage of boiling things, in my opinion. Now, we all know the back-up plan can't work either, but a villain who never had a back-up plan wouldn't have gotten very far in life anyway, so it should probably be considered.

Villains should never trust pretty people who were formerly on the other side. Princesses, or princes depending on your villain, who suddenly become more amorous the closer we get to the solar eclipse, just aren't to be relied upon. Even if they may have entertained a tiny notion of switching sides, they always go back when they see the hero coming. Always. And your villain shouldn't use them as bait either. No stringing up damsels in the great hall where the final battle is going to take place. This just provides the hero with a grudge to carry.

Some other things to consider. You may want to stay away from evil cackling. This just means the villain has his eyes closed and mouth open at inconvenient times. Dark, swirling cloaks, though dramatic, tend to get caught on things. Amulets of power can fall off, and don't even talk to me about wearing rings of power while wielding a sword. For one thing, fingers swell when they get hot. Magical boots might be okay, though they're in short-supply as items of ancient mysticism. The leather tends to get worn. Books get burned, and a villain should be bright enough to have a copy made. Magical swords are all right, I suppose, as long as they don't get knocked out of the villain's hand, skitter across the room, and land at the feet of the hero's waiting friend. Magical foods will just be eaten by some idiot night-guard coming down to the kitchen for a snack.

Does it seem like this will make it impossible to have a good villain? Not at all. It just means your villain, and your hero, have to be smarter. Or that your villain has to break out of some of the molds. Your villain could be extremely smart for example; smart enough not to use the forbidden spell, smart enough not to engage the hero in final combat, but perhaps suffer from near-sightedness and tumble into a pit. Er. Or something.

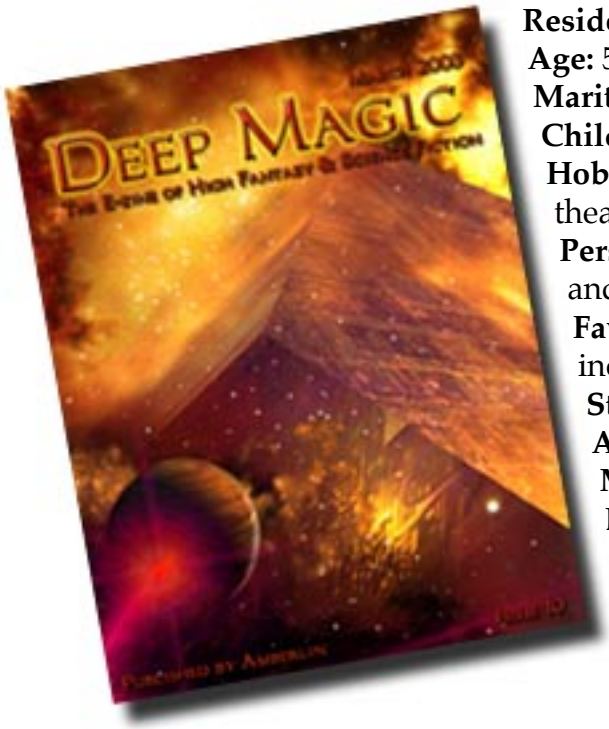
Ultimately, there are still a lot of ways to get rid of a villain. But unless you're writing a comedy, try not to let your villain be brought down by his own stupidity. That's just going to give your hero a swelled head, and with that and the sword and the muscles, he'll be insufferable.

The End

Inspired in part by "The Evil Overlord List."
http://www.eviloverlord.com/lists/overlord.html

As well as many television shows, movies, and books where villains are too stupid to be believed.

Feature Artist
Reuben C. Fox



Residence: Utah
Age: 54
Marital Status: married
Children: 2
Hobbies: writing (see *Refuge* in Deep Magic's first issue), theater
Personal Quote: "Work is the nearest substitute for genius, and genius without work is barren." J. Reuben Clark, Jr.
Favorite Books: The Foundation Trilogy (Notice I didn't include the later works. I think they spoiled the series.)
Started Painting In: 1960 (Used pencil from about 1954 on)
Artist Most Inspired By: Chesley Bonnestell
Mediums: pastel, acrylic, CGI (both 2D and 3D software)
Education: University of Utah, journalism and mass communication. Some advanced art classes in teen years and early twenties, though I am mostly self-taught.
Where Published: mostly in SF/Star Trek/Fantasy Cons, but not much recently.
Where to Buy Artwork or Contact: dragonations@aol.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I've drawn ever since I was a kid. I was no good at sports but did okay with a pencil. While everyone else was out playing football, I stayed in and drew and drew. I attached myself to SF at an early age. Its great diversity of imagination provided the only kind of pictures I was interested in doing—SF and Fantasy, though interest in fantasy came later.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I strive for a realistic, even photographic look with lots of detail. I like to try to build worlds and show things that no one has seen before. Even the earth-like worlds need to have an "alien" sense about them to be interesting to me. The "Landmoor" cover looks pretty traditional. It's the dragonshrike in the sky that pushes it off earth.

Feature Artist: Reuben C. Fox

Future cover for Jeff Wheeler's *Landmoor*

Q: Where do your get the ideas or inspiration for your art?
A: Music, mostly. I find cinematic "classical" works the most inspiring. Some of my favorite composers are Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Gustav Holst, Ottorino Respighi, Richard Wagner, John Williams, Jerry Goldsmith, and James Horner. I love to listen to music while I create. Music can take me away from the world and its troubles. I know escapism is frowned on by many mainstream artists and academicians. That bothered me for a long time until I read a quote by C. S. Lewis. I'll only paraphrase it here. In a communication with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien he asked, What group of people do you think would be most obsessed with and upset by the idea of escape? He then answers his own question: Jailers.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story)
A: I assume you mean the cover. I was fascinated with some of the super structures suggested by Dyson and then actually developed and explored by Larry Niven in his "Ringworld" series. When Polyphemus was suggested I really wanted to try to portray an artificial object that was light-years across. It's still too small in the picture. I'll keep working on it.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Some movies I saw as a kid captured my imagination and launched me into the genre, as yet, never to return. Among them "Forbidden Planet," "War of The worlds," "When Worlds Collide," "The Time Machine," and "This Island Earth." Most of these seem pretty corny today but they can still evoke a sense of wonder in me as they did when I saw them as an impressionable kid. I try to pass on that child-like wonder using my own visions.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Some of the paintings I have done for family and friends are my best work. I think this is because they were done out of a sense of giving and I could do what I wanted without having to keep the market in the back of my mind.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: I'm seeing (in the artistic field) a lot more "serious artists" working there. It used to be kind of a joke to do SF and Fantasy art. Now, some really fine work is appearing by a lot of very talented people. It's about time. There is still a kind of prejudice (even in the SF/Fantasy art community) against CGI work. Using a machine to help you create your work is a crutch—right? Maybe, but it has afforded me a freedom nothing in the more traditional media can provide. Besides, I've always wanted to paint with light (a very SF or fantasy notion)! Using a computer, I can.

Prometheus' Tears
By Mark Reeder

Miller rolled back in his chair away from the monitor, and crashed against a file cabinet. He ignored the jolt and raised his hands like a victorious boxer. "Yes!"

Dr. Nina Coustakis smiled at the grad student's zeal while she stared intently at the screen in front of her, reading the data relayed from the Paris-Meudon Observatory. Even though the information was already two days old, she felt a thrill shudder through her muscles. The data stream meant that the Cassini spacecraft's probe, named Huygens, had successfully passed through the boundary layer of Titan's thermosphere and entered its atmosphere. She studied the initial readings. So far they were what the team expected: nitrogen and methane atmosphere, ethane, hydrocarbons, and trace amounts of hydrogen cyanide.

She glanced up at Norris, the oldest grad student in her group, studying his monitor. Norris was hunched over, glasses balanced on the tip of his nose, eyes inches from the screen, as though the words and symbols would give up some arcane knowledge if he could just stare at them long enough.

The satellite link is holding steady. Nothing to do now but wait and hope the pros in Europe do their job right.

Other students, scattered through the lab, watched monitors hastily set up for the occasion.

Miller turned toward her; his craggy features twisted into a lopsided grin. "It's confirmed. Titan is not made of Swiss cheese."

Coustakis laughed along with the rest of the students as the tension in the room evaporated.

"Is this information pretty much what you expected?" a male voice interrupted her amusement.

Coustakis swiveled in her chair and stared at the reporter. She stifled a groan. The local paper had sent him here to do a filler piece for the Sunday supplement.

"Sorry. Forgot you were here for a moment, Mr. Lumins." Her apology sounded like an afterthought.

"I get that all the time," he said, blue eyes flat. He jabbed his pen at the students clustered around the computer screens in the small lab. "So, is the information provided by the probe what you expected?"

"Pretty much. Huygens is passing through the different atmospheric layers now. We'll have a better picture once the probe has landed."

Norris pulled back from the screen and pointed at the amber glow. "The satellite link is holding steady. Nothing to do now but wait and hope the pros in Europe do their job right."

Lumins cleared his throat. "You mentioned yesterday during the phone interview that this probe was your best chance to study early Earth geology. I still don't understand it." He waved a long-fingered hand at her screen. "You think Titan's some kind of primordial soup?"

She met his questioning gaze with a smile. "We hope so. Carl Sagan once noted that 'organic

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A Cure for Insomnia II: An Editor Lulls to Sleep

By Jeremy Whitted

There is a reason why I'm not an author. I've been staring at a blank screen for 10 minutes trying to figure out how to start this article. Now that I've started, I'll probably run out of patience in a couple pages. I'm just not cut out to be an author. Maybe for short stories, but if I wrote one per year I'd be doing well. I guess that's why I'm in the background of Deep Magic. The grunt. The layout man. But it's a job I love, because there's nothing more satisfying than laying out a book or e-zine for others to read. (Well, there are probably several things, but they're not career-related.)

I did an article a few months ago about the process involved with producing Deep Magic. I won't bother you with that again. But with our current plans, I have finally been able to dive back into book layout, which is quite different than, and equally enjoyable to, doing the layout for a PDF e-zine. So I thought I'd ramble a bit about it. Some of you may find it interesting, especially if you want to do your own layouts for novels, short stories, poetry, etc.

Let me start by saying that when you're ready to lay out a book, don't – under any condition – open up Microsoft Word.

Let me start by saying that when you're ready to lay out a book, don't – under any condition – open up Microsoft Word. Unless it's to retrieve the text of the book. Word, despite its claims and attempts at features, is not a layout program. If you want to do it right, you need the right tools. And if you're actually going to have another company print it, whether in standard offset printing or print-on-demand, they will require certain formats.

There are two types of programs you need: a graphics editor and a page layout program. Let's talk graphics, because that's the easiest. If you're doing a novel, the cover is probably all you need to worry about, unless you feature internal art or maps, whether color or black and white. To get that image prepped and ready to go, you'll want the right program. I recommend the excellent, and very pricey, Adobe Photoshop. It's the standard, and it can handle most anything. Adobe also sells a stripped-down version called Adobe Photoshop Elements, which would also probably do the trick, though I am not familiar with its limitations. Photoshop runs around $600. Photoshop Elements comes in at a cheap $99.

There are other applications available, but some printing companies ask for the covers to be submitted in a Photoshop template, so Corel won't help you there. Others, however, let you send a postscript file, or even a PDF file, so a different graphics application can work. Regardless of which application you choose, you'll use it to create and/or touch up your images. The final image will be placed into your layout in one of many formats, depending on the program. The most common are TIF, EPS, and PSD formats. (Unless, of course, you're submitting a Photoshop template, in which case it never makes it to an additional layout program.)

That's enough on graphics. Now for the fun stuff: the layout.

For many years I did my work on QuarkXpress. Let me mention right here that I'm not a pro

at this. It's not my day job, and I've never been trained or received education in it – other than the education of trial and error and having my partners give me constant change requests, forcing me to repeatedly redo my work – not that it bothers me or anything. Anyway, like I said, I used Quark. And it was a great program. Then Apple released OSX, their new operating system. Yes, I'm a Mac man. A preacher, more like, because I would gladly destroy every Windows machine out there and convert everyone to the glory that is the Macintosh. If I could. Again I digress. Apple released their first version of OSX two years ago. Quark still hasn't provided a native version. Since I had a desire to switch to their new OS, I made the ever-controversial decision to switch to Adobe InDesign, which is slowly catching Quark as the must-use layout program in the industry. It's still not the standard, but with a wider range of features and OSX compatibility, it's becoming increasingly popular. At least in the Mac world, which has a nice chunk of the publishing industry. InDesign has a street value of $699. Quark is roughly the same.

There are other programs, of course. The other big player is Adobe PageMaker, but Adobe appears to have moved ahead with InDesign instead of PageMaker. I'm sure there are other applications out there, but none with wide-enough industry support to be worth using. All of these programs cost a nice chunk of change. There's no way around that.

So we have a graphics program and a layout program. Where to start? This is where it's nice having modern technology, because not long ago, it was a more difficult process. Before, you couldn't lay out your pages in numeric order. For example, page two and page three wouldn't sit on the screen next to each other (when laying out a book, you generally want to lay it out in facing-page format, like a book sitting open with a page on the left and one on the right). Before, page two would actually sit next to page fifteen, with page one and sixteen just above. Those four pages would be printed on the same piece of paper, which would be folded in half, placed with the other oddly-numbered four-page layouts, and stuck to a binding. This gets more difficult when you have a long novel.

These days, computer programs on the printer side of things do that for you. You can just lay the book out in sequential order. Page one starts out by itself, pages two and three are next to each other below, and so on. It's much cleaner that way, and much more simple, especially since programs like InDesign and Quark take care of that flow for you. But is that it? Just lay your text there and you're done? Not quite.

First, you have the dimensions. Currently, I'm doing a test layout for *Landmoor*, which we ran in the first few issues of Deep Magic. The layout I'm testing is a larger-format paperback book, roughly six inches wide and nine inches tall. So let's work with that. InDesign (and any other layout program) will let you set the page size to whatever you want, as well as the margin. We'll probably use 1/2" margins on the sides, 3/4" on the bottom, and 7/8" on the top. All we did to come up with those numbers is look at existing fantasy paperbacks on the bookshelf. Nothing like leveraging off someone else's work!

Once that is set, it is best to set up a master page. In InDesign, I have a master spread, with the two facing pages. You'll notice, if you look at many paperbacks, that different publishers do different things. Usually, you want a page number and a header/footer on each page. We put the page number on the bottom, centered. Centered at top of the left page, we put the name of the novel. On the right page, we center the author name. You can choose your own style. Take a look at books in your collection for ideas. When you place these items on the master pages, then all the pages you create for the book will have them. If you need to change it at all (like you spelled the author's name wrong), just change it on the master, and all the pages will reflect it. For the page numbers, most programs offer automatic numbering. Just set the font face and size and insert the auto numbering. Now you don't have to worry about the page numbers. It's all done for you. If you delete a page in the middle,

the program will adjust the numbers accordingly. I love technology.

Now you're ready to bring in your text. Most likely, you're using Microsoft Word. Maybe WordPerfect. Or for the true Mac diehard, AppleWorks. Regardless, it's almost as simple as a cut and paste. However, you may not realize that Word, and other word processors, assigns special formatting tags to your documents. Do a cut and paste, and unwanted formats can be brought into your nice book layout. I'll use InDesign as my example, but I'm sure Quark and others works similarly. Here's how I get around the formatting issues.

First, I open a blank InDesign document and place the Word doc (or copy/paste, depending on the size). That's the nice thing about InDesign. You can place just about any type document, from image files to Word and Excel files. Once it's there, and the text has been flowed to however many pages it takes (auto-flowing text is just a quick command – it will flow your text and create as many new pages as it needs to put it all in), I select all the text. Then in the paragraph and character styles palette, I select No Format, do a Select All Unused, and delete them. What does this do? It tells InDesign to treat it all as plain text. No special indents, fonts, sizes, etc. However, there is one important thing is does keep. Any bolds and italics you have in the story will stay. Very important. I learned that one the hard way. Nothing like scrolling through dozens of pages, comparing them side-by-side with the original, re-applying bolds and italics. I believe there's a chapter in Dante's *Inferno* where people do that for eternity.

When that's done, I select all the text again, copy it, and paste it into my book layout. When I did that with *Landmoor*, it flowed to a wonderful 275 pages, give or take. (Mind you, this is a large paperback with a small font. There's a lot of text on those pages.) My first layout in a standard paperback size flowed to well over 400 pages.

Now the real fun starts. Everything up to now was prep work. Now the formatting starts. The first thing to do is to decide on various layout formats for your book and creating them in the paragraph styles palette. For example, what font face and size do you want for the body text of the story? How about for chapter headings? Section breaks? Once you decide, set each one up as a style and label it so you know what it is. Then start applying. The first step is easy. Select the entire story and click on your body text style. Now everything will be Palatino 12pt font, or Century Schoolbook 10pt font, or whatever you decided on. I suggest something common and easy to read. (We use Century Schoolbook 10pt for the text of *Landmoor*.) Don't get fancy with your fonts. Your paragraphs will all be indented to your specs as well. The next step is a little more tedious. You basically go through the whole story looking for new chapters, section breaks, and anything else that requires a different style. Highlight what you find and apply the style. For example, highlight the Roman numeral I in chapter one (if that's what you use for chapters), and click your chapter style. Now it will be centered on the page in a 20pt bold Futura font, or whatever you picked. Do the same with your section breaks and other areas that require special formatting.

One thing you want to look for is consistent spacing. For example, if your first chapter heading starts three line breaks down the page, make sure all your chapters are the same. How about the number of line breaks between the chapter heading and the start of the text? One line break? Two? There isn't really an industry standard, so it's your choice. But be consistent throughout the story.

So can you do all this without your paragraph styles? Of course. But here's the nice part. Do you want to change how far you indent each paragraph? It's easy. Just go to the style and change it from 1p to 3p. The whole story will adjust. This makes global changes quick and painless.

Once you have the story laid out, you do have all the intro pages: title page, dedication, and most important, the copyright page. There are a couple ways to figure out the copyright page. The first is to look through other books and capture the relevant data. I also suggest a reference guide. My

publishing bible is the Chicago Manual of Style, which gives excellent details on what to include in a copyright page. In fact, it will help you will all aspects of laying out your book. There are other style guides out there, but that one is my favorite.

You also have to get an ISBN number for your book (most printing companies can help with that), and you have to decide if you want to submit your book to the Library of Congress. There is a fee to do that. We submitted *The Wishing Lantern* to the Library of Congress, but we probably won't bother with *Landmoor*. But don't mention on your copyright page that your book is submitted to the Library if it isn't!

Once you have the guts finished, all that's left is laying out your cover and getting it all printed. Some print houses want the cover in Photoshop format, another reason for using that program. For the guts of the book, some want it in Quark or PageMaker format, some will take InDesign, and more and more will take it in PDF format. This is nice for InDesign, since exporting to PDF is native to the program. You'll want to work with a publisher for details on how they want a manuscript delivered. In most cases, the story will go first, and once the page count is confirmed, they'll ask for the cover. This is because you need to know how much space to allow for the spine. That will definitely affect your cover layout. And don't forget the barcode! (Your printer can probably help with that, or there are plenty of cheap shareware programs on the Internet that will handle it for you.)

There has been nothing more gratifying to me (in my professional life) than holding a book in my hands that I have produced. I remember when *The Wishing Lantern* came in the mail. It was a hardback children's book we published a few years back. I still enjoy flipping through it. I didn't do a perfect job on it, and we had printer problems, but I'm still proud of the final product. And I'm looking forward to *Landmoor* even more. Look for that novel to come out in the not-too-distant future. And in case you're interested, there just may be a Deep Magic Anthology in the future.

As for those of you aspiring to do your own story layout, I hope this article gets you pointed in the right direction. For those of you not interested in doing that, why in the world did you read through this entire article?! Are you insane?

The End

Jase's Challenge
By Clover Autrey

Willec scrambled toward the clearing, worn travel gear banging against his broad back. By all rights that couldn't have been what he'd heard!

Another high-pitched squeal rolled among the trees. A flock of chatterbrights shot out from dark leafy branches, squawking furiously as they winged up toward patches of blue sky.

Willec slackened his pace. Healthy curiosity was one thing; rushing up to the unknown, quite another. His bitter years defending the border had taught him that.

The squeal rang out again, so shrill and close Willec ground his teeth against the sudden assault on his ears. Carefully, he moved to the edge of trees. His breath caught in his throat.

A streak of brilliant yellow soared just above the meadowgrass, ruffling thin green stalks back with powerful strokes of air.

A dragon.

A small one, at that, roughly half the length of a man.

Abruptly, the dragon veered. With an exuberant squeal, he flew straight upward. Leathery wings pushed the air in great whooshes. Sunlight flashed across glistening scales, momentarily drenching him in riotous color. With a twist of his body, he dove. Air whistled across folded wings.

Willec's palm flattened against a tree's trunk; wrinkled bark pressed seams across his flesh.

A sharp whistle snapped his attention back to the clearing. The young dragon squealed as if in answer and turned over in the sky. Claw-tipped feet lowering first, wings rounded out, the dragon descended, moving on a course that was taking him directly toward Willec.

The dragon's slender neck arched. A span above the ground, he curved and skimmed across the grasses, wings gracefully extended, before flapping into a climb again.

Sweet Mother Of All, the dragon was at play. A smile Willec hadn't felt for a long time crept over his features.

The dragon rolled in the sky. Young muscles rippled in the sun's glow.

Willec wanted to step out from the trees, get closer. But where there was a young dragon, a mother, too, would be present. He scanned the meadow and the sky and found no sign of another dragon. Although a grown dragon could not fit between the trees, that didn't mean she wasn't sprawled across their tops, sunning herself. She could likely be over his head this very moment. He eyed the forest ceiling, looking for any overly large shapes or shadows.

A sharp whistle snapped his attention back to the clearing. The young dragon squealed as if in answer and turned over in the sky. Claw-tipped feet lowering first, wings rounded out, the dragon descended, moving on a course that was taking him directly toward Willec.

Willec froze, knowing he'd have a better chance of remaining hidden without any sudden

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TEARS OF MINYA

By Jeff Wheeler

CHAPTER Nine
The Royal Cougar, Tier of Median

Jaylin positioned himself in an alley between the Royal Cougar and a fuller's shop. From the position, he had a good view of West-Allen gate and the crowds going in and out, along with the main street running parallel. The smell of cloth from the fuller's place caused a little pang of homesickness. The rhythmic thumping of the paddles caused vibrations he could feel through the wall.

Thasos watched from the window at a rival inn across the street called the Crumpsall, which looked like its roof would fall in during the next storm. They had rented two rooms in the Cougar instead because of that reason, just in case the vigil lasted past curfew. Rohun Debahn, a pear-shaped man with spiky gray sideburns, sat inside the Cougar's common room counting receipts and humming. Jaylin had a good view of him from the side window. Cautiously, Jaylin waited and watched, keeping sharp for the legion sheriff he had seen with Lady Minya.

Doubts began whispering at him, but he kept them at bay with the thought that Carshalton would be discreet and that Thasos was nearby. The scab on his cheek itched, but he did not pick at it. He waited patiently, lingering and pacing in turns, and watched the gate and the inn's window.

He was working for a clever Prince and his Espion. He'd made an enemy of a Mark. He'd befriended the Captain of the Queen's Guard and a legion sheriff Captain. When he tallied it like that, he was pleased by his successes.

In the late afternoon, there was a blur of black at the gate, and Jaylin squinted to see. Legion sheriffs came through the mouth of West-Allen, clearing a path before them. Halesowen was in the forefront. Jaylin's heart skittered. A company of twelve followed him through the gate and up the street. Their march was familiar. He had seen it only a few days before when the same group had stormed the Prince's ship.

"By the Veil," Jaylin breathed, watching them march toward the Royal Cougar. Not even Thasos could handle that many. People scattered out of their way. Watchful, worried stares followed the group of sheriffs. Their hauberks and thick tunics made them all appear massive. Jaylin glanced across the street and saw Thasos peering at him, but he knew from Thasos' vantage point he couldn't see Halesowen approach. He weighed the situation. Should he have expected Halesowen to come alone? No, the head of the mystaqua brigade would probably be very cautious about tips.

"The moon always rises," Jaylin muttered, positioning himself at the corner of the Cougar, conspicuously, and folded his arms. He waited for the sheriffs to approach, but made certain he could still see Thasos. As the legion sheriffs advanced, he saw their features. They were grim-faced, yet

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Procyx Book Two
The Works of Men

Prologue

The Artifacts

"It's not nearly enough!" the customs woman hissed. "Not for what you're trying to smuggle."

Standing beneath an air condition vent, Coss wiped the perspiration from his bald head with a damp cloth. The room boiled over with Federation colonists desperate to find passage off the war-torn world. Coss searched over his shoulder for any of the natives. At the moment, none of the Mhyrnians with their high foreheads and violet tinged skin were anywhere in sight. Federation troops clustered everywhere. Some were bandaged. *Bandages*, Coss thought. It was *that* bad that even the soldiers had to wear bandages while their wounds healed, and without the rejuv radiation, that could take weeks or months.

"Well?" the woman asked.

"How much more do you want?"

"Ten thousand for me and ten thousand for the contact on Modelk."

"What?!"

"Quiet! You want to attract attention?" the woman took a sip of her drink. It was a local brew that used an alcohol imitator that relaxed and invigorated without intoxicating. It was also highly addicting. The woman closed her eyes for a moment, relishing the rush. She smiled. "I wouldn't even be trying this if I weren't on *my* way out in a couple of days."

"Twenty thousand . . . I can't possibly come up with that kind of money!"

The woman shrugged and glanced at one of the Federation soldiers nearby. "Then you won't get past the gate. They're watching for smuggled pluridium, and what you've got could buy a world, no?"

Coss wiped his forehead again. Twenty thousand new credits. He did have it, but he would need every one to make it back. He shook his head slowly.

The woman studied him with narrowed eyes. At last she took a final swig and reached for her bag. "Be seeing you. Good luck . . ."

"Wait," Coss grabbed at her forearm. She smiled and sat down, waiting. Coss opened his parcel and took out his credit voucher.

"I want it in cash--no trail to link you and me and my comrade on Modelk."

Coss flushed with anger.

"There's a trader just down the concourse," the woman stood.

They moved through the throng. The din of crying children and babies was so loud that general announcements were swallowed up in it. Evacuees were desperate, angry, shouting while officials and spaceport employees moved about their business calmly and took bribes openly. Coincidentally, it seemed there were never any Federation soldiers watching when the money changed hands. They

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She settled into the first to beckon her, watching impatiently out the window. Three minutes until departure.

A head passed below her vision, ice-white hair and a mottling of blue. Fear clambered into Anyette's mind. No denying pursuit now. "Damn them to hell," she said, drawing startled eyes from the woman two seats away. Another nodded her head in sisterly agreement.

A cab would have been quicker-- safer, too. Snatching her shawl from where it settled in her seat, Anyette hurried down the row of cars to where the crowds were thickest. There'd be room for nothing but standing, soon, but she slipped between the two largest people she could find. One looked at her in askance, but neither suggested she move.

All right. She was free – squished, perhaps, but free. Anyette clawed around in the slip-pockets of her shawl for her newspaper. Taking the reading pointer from its plastic sheath, she unrolled the waxy data sheet and loaded the day's news. Without aim, she tapped through the first several pages. Crowds often confused fans, and sometimes a mere glimpse was enough-- but whoever followed her showed a sharper tenacity.

Anyette considered her plan of escape. She'd walk off at the next stop; it would leave her in more familiar surroundings. There'd be shops to dash into if nothing else worked. After that, a private cab to the apartment complex, or a hotel or market if necessary. She had some service numbers that would pick up at any place she chose.

An automated voice floated into the car, relating standard safety and general good tidings. Advertisements bars, lined in rows near the ceiling, darted from one smiling picture to another. The district president of Robotics, Inc. came up, speaking in a voice turned down to mute. Words flashed above his left ear, and if Anyette wanted, she could hear the ad, warm, compelling voices boasting about smooth new features and affordable prices. She pretended to watch as the train gained momentum.

A glance into the other cars revealed no blue-cheeked man. Good. But when the train slowed to a day-weary halt, Anyette was quick to squeeze herself from between her sheltering giants and strike out for the door, rolling her newspaper as she went. Traffic seemed to magically thicken as she stepped into the flow; it was mostly people with children, coming back from Friday dinner out. Those without familial obligations would be hitting late night entertainment spots. Anyette drifted with the tide towards the wall map. She could take the silver line . . . no. The cab. It was the surest way to avoid pursuit.

Or had she lost them already? Anyette watched the torrents. A fat woman in a spotted dress, who jerked her head around several times as if uncertain of what she saw; teenagers, clustered around some flashy new tech; a nervous-looking couple carting a child of indeterminate sex, and three tall, dark women with foreign accents.

The blue-cheeked man stood a platform removed, his eyes not yet on her. Anyette swallowed an urge to tremble and pawed along the wall until her fingers found a sticky handle. A bathroom, but unisex: no good to hide in. Still, she swiped at the hem of her hat, wondering at what could be incorporated into a disguise. Her blouse was unchangeable; still, she could turn inside-out her skirt and replace her hat with her multi-coloured shawl. But she doubted she could pass as a woman of minority nation or culture.

No change; she'd just leave as soon as possible. Anyette studied her fingers and hoped everyone washed their hands before leaving the restroom. Blue-cheeked man turned farther from her-- but her relief froze when his hand lifted to his mouth. He had a ring speaker. Anyette felt fair certain that he wasn't relaying bad news. She fled up the terminal escalator, from the underground into misty night . . . .

A firm vise snapped around her arm. Anyette shouted and twisted, her fingers seeking

enemy eyes, throat, anything. Her captor's grip shifted deftly, swivelling away from her reaching arm and the terminal. His other hand clamped her mouth shut from below, so she couldn't bite. She was turned from him, unable to see his face, but she had registered the padded shoulders of a smartly tailored coat.

Not normal fans -- such an understatement! This was far worse than the workings of her imagination. Now she'd be another statistic, another body raped and gutted in the alley, found half-rotted by a street-sweeping tech. Another bloated body in the water, perhaps, wrapped in tarp and drilled full of holes by the fish, or maybe in the trunk of an abandoned car. Anyette tried to shriek and drive her heel into her assailant's toes. No luck.

No one looked her way. She stood in the lights of a crowded subway entrance, a clear spot, the sort of place where things could be seen; but not a voice lifted, not a single person moved with intent to help. No rescue would be sweeping down on her. And when she was found, who knew when, she'd be the sadness of a minute in the news, worth a candle, maybe two-- and then the people currently walking by would change the station to a special on Brazamissio's stance against robotic monopolies.

What will happen now?

"Tea," suggested the man behind her, and Anyette was sure she had misheard that courteous voice, but then it spoke again. "It is time for refreshment."

Such a cordial voice, the syllables so precise -- not what Anyette expected from a serial killer, though she knew those expectances were what trapped people. When the hand slipped from her mouth, she nearly fell, so weak were her knees. "Where?"

"We will take you there." Another man peeled from the growing darkness, dressed in the same style of heavy-shouldered coat. She recognised him: Blond Hair #2. "Don't resist."

He and Cordial Voice took her arms. Anyette let herself be pushed along, for she was no Brazamissio character, to leap bridges and bullets and still have energy for a rowdy night with a new man.

They walked only a short while – not to the alley where they would shoot her, not to the lighted bridge from which they would push her, but to a small shop, half-hidden between two chain restaurants, made of brick and plaster. It would be quaintly old-fashioned in another situation. Cordial Voice pulled a chair from an outside table and ushered her into it before seating himself. His clean face was obscured by shadows in a theatrical way. Surely deliberate. Blue-Cheek entered the shop from behind Anyette – when had he started following? - and Blond Hair #2 went to stand in the darkness beyond the block.

"I hope you like Darjeeling," Cordial Voice said. "And chocolate croissants. It's all he ever orders here."

"I'll survive." Her voice sounded faint, a disappointment. No alleyway yet. Why had they told her they'd come here before? Did they think it wouldn't matter? Anyette checked the edges of her cloche hat and found no loose hairs. "What do you want?"

Cordial Voice let out a cool laugh. "We've a proposition for you, Anyette Delinqui."

"I don't-"

"Just listen."

Blue-Cheek returned with tea and pastries. He set some on the table between Anyette and Cordial Voice before walking into the dark with the leftover tray. "All right," Anyette said. No bridge yet. "What do you want?"

"Do you have your portfolio on you?"

"No." Anyette felt her brow lift in disbelief. Her portfolio? She had been stalked – and caught - and terrified because they wanted to examine a laminated screen in a leather case? "I never carry it

casually."

"Pity. We'll have to pick it up, then." Cordial Voice sipped at his tea and gestured. Anyette saw dim movement in the shadows. "They go to get the car."

"You're madmen." It would have been quicker – simpler, at any rate - to contact her by . . . normal channels. Anyette winced. Though the first words out expressed the best ideas, they seldom had the finest phrasing. However, Cordial Voice grinned, an expression somehow more real than his laugh. He raised his cup to her.

"And peculiar ones at that." He sipped. "Drink your tea."

In defiance, Anyette took up her pastry and tore a large bite from it. It wasn't chocolate; flat and icing-drizzled, it had a sickly orange filling. Across the table, Cordial Voice's appeared to be lemon. The lighting refused to tell.

A car hummed in quiet announcement as it turned the corner. Cordial Voice pushed back his chair and swept an amazing bow before waltzing to the car door. His command went unspoken but clearly meant; Anyette tossed back her Darjeeling before following him into the padded leather interior.

Blue-Cheek and Blond Hair #2 sat across from her, near the car controls. Sky roof, everything, but there'd be no escape there. They could do anything; no one would know. Anyette swallowed the tannic aftertaste of her tea and entertained the idea that it might be poisoned. But her only dizziness was self-made, sprung up from fear.

They knew where her apartment was. The driver pulled to a loitering halt not at the main lobby, but at the back, beneath her third-story window. "Ten minutes," Cordial Voice said. "No more. Don't be stupid and call the police."

"Like I'd do that with you just outside." Anyette pushed past the fair-haired men to the sidewalk. The rear door opened with an iris scan and she was in her rooms too quickly, treading up the long living room floor to the knotty turn in the wall that hid her bedroom. She turned on the entertainment screen for the babble of noise.

Her portfolio sat on a shelf in the living room, next to leather-bound editions of old and seldom-read books, gourd statuary and rustic prints. It was always there. Nine minutes. Eight minutes, fifty-three seconds.

Anyette flung her scarf onto the bedspread. Her credit card, she tucked into her stockings so the plastic of her ankle-high boots hid it; just in case she received the opportunity for her own ride back. Or out. Or away. Her fingers trembled as she executed the task. It was mafia beneath her window. She'd known the organised crime rate was climbing, but-- they could have made an appointment. Surely it was better to let fewer people know who you really were, no matter what they might suspect?

She could use some vodka now, to chase the taste of tea and fear from her mouth. A nice, tall one, with orange juice and a scoop of melon. Something citric. "Oranges and lemons, say the bells-." No. She cut the rhyme off. She wasn't mad. Just feeling closer to death than she'd been in a long time. At least then there'd been a half-dozen people to gape and exclaim over the appearance of the dusty doppelganger of their favourite actress, rising from the ashes of the capsized truck in which she'd hidden from mistaken, raving fans. Dying now, she'd be unnoticed.

If she died now. Anyette swept off her cap and ran her hands through her white hair, considering the array of dyes she sometimes used when masquerading around her clients. No-- seven minutes wasn't time enough to become a redhead. And what if they were standing outside her window, listening to her crack up through sensitive spying gear?

Mafia, she was certain -- they had that flavour. That in itself didn't surprise her – she fancied

some of her richer clients to have similar illicit backgrounds- but *those* clients had come to her the normal way, a recommendation and an appointment, this-is-what-I-want-now-get-it-done, here's your budget. No stalking. The fact that they didn't disguise themselves with a veneer of legality meant something. Anyette was sure it boded ill-- but how ill? God, why couldn't they be like her other clients?

She stared at herself in the mirror hanging from one wall. Too drab. No flavour. She wasn't meek putty for their ideas. Pulling off her skirt, she flipped it over to reveal its purple velvet undersides, trimmed with black. It added vitality to her charcoal-grey jacket. White hair, purple and grey-- not as much a pushover. Anyette sucked in a new breath. Clothing was a trivial thing to think about. It showed how close she was to panic. Attitude was attitude, not shirts.

Fine. She'd go. Snatching up her portfolio, she stalked into the hall. Behind her, the screen played, muffled by the closing door; a preview for Daniul Tarter's film-in-progress, starring Brazamissio.

"One minute left," Cordial Voice said when she climbed into the car. The windows fogged to an impenetrable black as they left the kerb. "Good time."

"I try," Anyette said. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see later," said Cordial Voice. The car lapsed into silence. Nervousness began to creep; Anyette tried to judge from the pattern of gentle stops and purrs of motion where they headed, but it was to no success. She practised levelling her breathing, the hard rectangle of her portfolio offering peculiar comfort.

A stop jarred her, and as scattered thoughts fled from her mind, Anyette realised that she had – of all things inappropriate for the moment - drifted into sleep. The door slid open and the driver looked in, a smile tugging at her small, cold mouth. "You've all arrived. Get out."

Anyette stepped into the last of evening and was flanked before she could do more than look up. Smokestacks and raw graffiti spoke of the industrial district. The building looming twelve floors above Anyette was a warehouse, worn but fitted with advanced tech.

"This way." Cordial Voice touched her shoulder. Anyette resisted the automatic curling of her hand into a fist and allowed herself to be taken before a pocked metal door. The lock was ocular; Cordial Voice dipped his head before the scanner, and the barrier parted.

Musty air swept out. Anyette drew back, hesitating, and then continued as Cordial Voice took the lead in heading along the narrow, greasy hall. "Where are we-?"

"We're here," Cordial Voice called, not to her. Spastic lighting flickered down the way, and a door slid open.

"Anyette Delinqui," spoke a man from behind a desk. He sat in darkness, steadily growing brighter as luminescent green tubes focused into life behind bamboo screens. The effect was ghastly. "Most pleased to become acquainted with you. For the sake of this meeting, think of me as Working Man. I'm glad you could come."

"I had a few moments," she replied.

Too fresh. But it elicited a laugh, not from the personage before her, but from a disembodied presence, noises leaking from the veiled communications box on the desk. It was a genderless voice, strained through a set of distorters. "I didn't think you'd ask for Brazamissio herself."

"I didn't ask for Brazamissio." The lighting wasn't going to improve. Working Man gestured. "Portfolio."

Blue-Cheek intercepted Anyette before she could step forward, grabbing the leather folio and pressing it into Working Man's hands. A palette of wide colours played across Working Man's face as he undid the portfolio's top clasps and opened it to consider the screen of slide images inside.

His shadow-stained fingers worked the control dial with deft surety, well familiar with similar tech. "What do you think of this room?"

Anyette started. "This room? If the desk faced the door directly, it would give you a greater sense of authority."

"What if I don't want that?"

"Then don't move the desk." Either way, the obstructing lighting could make use of a touch less garish and glaring. Anyette drew in another breath, hating the smell of cigarettes and dry mould. Air freshener would likely be laughed at. There was nothing for it. "What do you want of me?"

"A job well and discreetly done." Working Man tilted his head, light traipsing across his face but revealing no true form; it was the speaker voice that had commented. "Service is wanted, the provider has been brought, and contracts will shortly be signed – discretion is advised - in other words, we want you and will have you."

"But for what?"

"Your sheer impetuousness. Working Man?" Anyette caught a note of wryness in the way that was said.

The man at the desk clasped his fists together. "Before we deal further," he said, "an understanding will be reached. You are safe until you betray us. What you will be doing will in no way seem illegal unless linked to data -- data which we will release if you falter in your half of the bargain. Even then, your troubles are less likely to be with the law than with us. Our trouble is not one you want or are prepared to confront. Declining is not an option open to you. Agreed?"

"What is my bargain?" The question very much called for a pliant yes -- Anyette belatedly wondered if she should have given it. Cordial Voice's covered eyes tipped toward her. What did he think?

Working Man made an undecipherable noise. "To keep silent on anything . . . *incriminating*. We have never met, this has not happened, you know nothing of future events. Agreed?"

Anyette began to consider how Italy might be through the brisk merging of autumn with winter. Italy . . . maybe Belgium. Or Nicaragua. Zimbabwe? Anywhere else. But she was stuck in this trap, for now; she had to consign herself to the role of actress. Her chest felt fluttery as she intoned the word, "Agreed."

"Good." Working Man smiled -- at least, Anyette assumed he smiled. The play of green light across the lines of his jaw made certainty difficult. "The actress Brazamissio – you have heard of her, I assume? - has purchased a loft in this city with intent for future use. It's as of yet unfurnished, but once she hears of your wonderful work in Tarter's old mansion, she'll-."

"I didn't know Tarter had an old mansion," Anyette interjected. Clearly he did, plainly she would soon be cast loose in it, but the role of actress required certain lines. Working Man had a true smile on his face now.

"He does, and you're soon to give it your designer's touch. His convenient offsides will lend your name to the prosperous and popular, and give you an appointment with the beloved starlet--one which, I expect, will boost the prosperity of your career considerably."

"And?" Anyette could picture a horrific array of things, from being ordered to paint explosives into the walls to installing poisoned needles in upholstery, but an ironic little voice laughed about how then, at least, she wouldn't be confused for anyone else. Except for the occasional rabid Brazamissio's-come-back-from-the-dead, she'd be free. "What else?"

"Nothing more," said the Working Man. "Save that, of course, you will be hiring help from certain provided agencies." He gestured, green and black in the dark room, to Cordial Voice. "You may call him Vi. You'll be seeing much of each other for a short while."

Blue Cheek and Blond Man #2 had disappeared on errands of their own. Vi dipped his head as if in vexation, though it could have been affirmation. "Well," Anyette said. "That's very good. What assurances do I get?"

Audacity, hissed a voice in her head. "Assurances?" asked Working Man.

"Money. I'm a nervous girl, it makes me feel better." Too brash. Far too brash, though true: money could ably apply itself to a situation *somewhere else*. "What's my commission?"

"Very high." Working Man fished into his pocket for something small and set it on the table's edge; a low-denomination coin, not even enough for fare back home. "More than that, but let it assuage you for now. And without additional charge, we throw in the boost Tarter and Brazamissio combined will lend to your clientele."

"Thank you," Anyette said, acerbically. She didn't touch the coin. "Is this all for now? I suppose I have to be blindfolded on the way back."

Working Man hummed under his breath. "That is quite an idea-- very authentic. It's only precaution, understand, until we have made use of your employment."

How delightful, Anyette thought, but she said nothing. Blindfolding was better than being shot for seeing too much. Unless they shot her after blindfolding. But it seemed dubious, now.

"May your evening be as delightful as mine," she said, and let Vi lead her from the room and into a strip of blue fabric that felt torn from a jacket. Then she was dependent on his escort back to the car, where the black windows let her see again.

Vi was her only accompaniment, except for the driver -- Anyette assumed she was the same woman as before. She couldn't see through the screen. Each turn felt odd; were they taking a different way back? Probably.

"Well," Anyette said, resting her feet on the empty seat across from her, "It seems I get to see you again. Does this mean we get to enjoy more tea?"

"Most likely." A look faltered across Vi's face, discouraging and rife with another thought. Goose pimples crept up Anyette's spine. The answer was disheartening.

* * *

Anyette took a deep breath and tried to stare at the room without fainting. At least she could choose some of the furnishings. She already had. But she still couldn't believe her gene-donor's taste.

She had not yet met Brazamissio, and her representative had made it fairly clear that she would not. Fine for Anyette. The representative hadn't looked beyond her dyed black hair and glasses. Brazamissio apparently knew nothing more than her name and reputation, but there were things she couldn't help but notice in a face-to-face confrontation. People gazed into each other like mirrors when they were looked the same.

The giant double-poster bed was pushed against the far wall, a few feet from the corner. Anyette had favoured setting the bed before two of the four front windows and making walls of curtains, but it wasn't her choice -- labels told her which room would hold what. She preferred when her clients gave greater flexibility, but she could make do with the colour palettes given her by the representative.

If only she could do the same with some of the pre-purchased furniture she was expected to incorporate. Anyette stared down her nose at a black lacquer-framed print, a holograph of a couple writhing together like fish on a stormy beach. She'd put it above the bed, where it would be shrouded by the orange and persimmon draperies that swept over the bed and some of the ceiling.

She'd also have the bed tilted at an angle from the wall, so only the upper left bedpost touched.

It would make the room seem more lopsided. Her "assistants" could do that -- they deserved it. Anyette twitched an orange-and-red diamond rug at an angle sharper than that which she intended for the bed. The floor was cement; a decent choice for the room, but it would need rugs aplenty, or an interior heating system, to keep the cold out. A triangular wardrobe would fit in the left corner, near the bathroom door.

Twisting the collar of her grey jacket back into form, Anyette tried to glimpse her watch without actively looking at it. The "assistants" would arrive shortly. She wished they'd come late, or not at all. No, she didn't -- then anxiety would eat her as she wondered *when* they'd arrive.

She checked her watch again, tightening the leather band so the timepiece would stop slipping around to the inside of her wrist. Six minutes. She could leave. It wouldn't take much; out the building and into the street, she'd be ready to run. She wouldn't even stop at home, just buy some luggage and grab a ticket and call her parents at the airport. The conversation would be easy: "Would you like to join me next week in Prague? Or Italy? I've known you've always wanted to see Padua, Dad." No hints that she was fleeing for her life from the mafia. They'd say no only if they thought she was in danger. She'd stop in Brazil –wasn't that where everyone bought fake passports? - and transfer her accounts to Zurich before anyone knew what had happened. She already had an account there -- just barely enough to open one.

But Anyette supposed the Working Man knew that. The Working Man, or his boxed voice. And if she left, they'd be angrier with her by the cost of each ticket used to bring her back.

Knock! Bang! Click-bang-knack! She expected the racket, but it still startled her. Anyette grimaced; couldn't they have the grace to ring the chimes? It sounded less demanding.

Anyette left the partitioned bedroom for the main of the loft, faceless windows streaming light on her back. Those would have teal décor, and they wanted that wall painted a pale grey. Who'd keep the entertaining room so close to the bedroom?

Brazamissio. Anyette sighed and jerked open the door.

A hand stopped mid-knock; Vi's hand. He still wore shades, the same savvy style as before, but he wore baggy synthetic pants set with multiple pockets, and buckets pooled on the floor around him.

"About time," Anyette told him. "I was afraid you would be late."

"We're never late unless we intend to be." Vi picked up his paint cans and buckets, and Anyette had a sudden desire to smack him outside the head and flee. But there were others in the hall. Four others. One Japanese, with tattoos peeking at her from under his long white sleeves. The other three were of unidentifiable blends, hair bleached and dyed to bright colours.

Stepping aside, Anyette let them enter. No braining. "There's colour samples taped on the two walls that need painting, and the bathroom's to be black." Black! "I've made marks in chalk on the walls where the paintings and wall-hangings go -- the marks are where the nails go, not the tops of the frames. If there's two hooks on the painting, have the chalk mark stand for the middle. You'll want to put up the blinds at the far back first so I can do the curtains, and there's a chandelier needing installation, and the kitchen machines need to be hidden behind doors. Brushed steel. Most lamp fixtures need rewiring. The moulding goes onto the guest bathroom ceiling. Yes, the blue and gold. This is all the crew you've got?" she asked Vi.

She thought she sounded good; arrogant, like a newly famous decorator who'd just been honoured with the Tarter mansion, but he only smiled. "It's all we need."

"Very well. The banisters need to be taken off the descent into the entertainment room, and some furniture needs lifting. You've wheel-bots, don't you?"

Perhaps that was a mistake-- the mafia was *against* the robotics industry, after all, but Vi

grinned. "We have those."

"Then it seems you don't need me. May I go?"

Another grin. "No. We might need your excellent sense of design." He shut the door and looked around. A sudden anxiety swept his face. "Very interesting colours."

"I agree. Effusive, aren't they?"

"And brimming with charm."

"Let me return to my work." Anyette walked from him, back to the bedroom.

The Tattooed Man was applying something to the back of the picture Anyette had despaired over; it wasn't a nail. A listening device.

He looked up when she entered, and Anyette rolled her wrist in an absent effort at maintaining poise. "Lovely image, isn't it?"

A grunted reply. So, only Vi had permission to talk to her. She could live with that -- if only she weren't involved in this at all. "While you're at it," Anyette said, "I'd like that bed moved."

He grumbled then, but the bed was tilted to the desirable angle. Anyette took a wall-climber from her own equipment and sat on the floor, determining coordinates for bolts to be drilled in. It was simple work, and soon the tech scooted up the wall and onto the ceiling, buzzing. Its flat mechanical body reminded Anyette of a very ugly dog; segmented metal formed a rough muzzle and LED lights made eyes. She couldn't see the drillwork being accomplished -the wall-climber had its tools located in the middle of its ovular belly - but it was always satisfactory.

When it finished, she had it transport heavy velvet flaps to the bolts and fuse them together. It would hold. Anyette considered whether maintenance checks would be necessary. Another sort of upkeep tech could handle that. She'd leave some suggestions. *The pains of art.*

In the room beyond, the soft chugging of machinery spoke tinkering with hidden places -- Anyette imagined a flood of burnished metal lamps, wall hangings, entertainment systems and upholstery being fitted with devices of listening and watching. And she was complicit.

She didn't have to listen. Anyette slipped inside the master's bath and shut the door behind her.

The bathtub was massive, grey slate tile bordering a porcelain basin large enough for a small family. Anyette kicked off her shoes and climbed inside, stretching out with her head near the wall. The shower was tucked into a corner, but it looked equally spacious.

Black. Anyette would have preferred to use the colour as an accent, but she could do the reverse -- white on black. The effect was not one she liked; things would have to be arranged just so, or the room would be skunk-like. Some grey sponging would tone down the harshness and blend nicely with the tub and the floor's white tiles. Better, at least.

Anyette looked up. The ceiling had a good shape; earlier, she'd ordered mouldings for it. White on white, a stylistic floral pattern, imitation Art Nouveau. A picture would go above her head on the wall, a print of a white lily with a white background and frame. No matting. Her budget for original art was limited, but she'd shop and see what she could do; a sculpture in the main room would be ideal. And unbugged.

Anyette closed her eyes. The criminal charges, were this discovered, would be . . . unpleasant, at least. The publicity that would surround it would be horrific. >>Brazamissio Double Charged in Surveillance Ploy.<< Though they probably wouldn't use the word "surveillance"-- it was too complex for daily news. Wire-tapping, then. Inaccurate but easier.

Brazamissio was an ardent campaigner against the robotics monopoly that was forcing lower-level workers out of their jobs. Part of her fame was her off-screen face of compassion. Anyette suspected that, as with many other screen personalities, it was mostly make-up. Perhaps that was

harsh, considering.

But the mafia was also anti-robotics. What did they have against Brazamissio? Perhaps, Anyette thought, she was an associate who had displeased them in some way. *How can I do this to my own gene-donor?*

The bathroom door opened and she looked up.

Vi set down a flat case and a tin of putty and frowned at her. There was no paint on his hands; Anyette wondered if he had done anything, or if he simply guided the rest of his crew. She truly didn't want to know. "That's an odd way to take a bath."

"Are you here for the moulding or the shower?" Anyette asked. It wasn't odd; it was embarrassing. She couldn't explain that it was the best way to gain a perspective of the room.

"Shower," Vi answered. He shut the door and walked past her, and Anyette reached for her shoes. "Wait."

Anyette dropped her shoes. Her quick escape whistled away. Vi opened the show door and stuck his head in, then he turned back to her with a grimace. It was odd to see a man bite his lip like that when she could see nothing of his eyes -- it was half an expression, half a tension, half a worry.

"Damn," Vi said, a little sadly. He reached into his pocket. Anyette stiffened, but he pulled out no weapon, but a card. Thin plastic, the words embedded inside: a business card. He flicked it into her lap.

Not picking it up, Anyette read the name: Jan Virmeer of Robotics, Inc. Office, phone number, net contact. Anyette shivered. The tub's faucet was digging into her neck. "That's an unfortunate name to be caught with. The parents were bad punsters?"

"If it makes you feel better, no one caught on until I reached college."

"Your school didn't have art history, then. Are you a sp-?" Anyette cut herself short as Vi – Virmeer - gestured. He wanted her to flip over the card.

She did, and a message had been inked onto the back: *everyone you've met in this so far has a card like this. There's going to be forty-seven wires in this flat.*

Trying not to stare, Anyette slid the card into her purse. Forty-seven. Robotics Inc. was planting listening devices. *Can I do this to my gene-donor?* "Damn, why?"

"Ruin the credibility of your opponents. It's a good method."

"Why not find another way?"

Virmeer didn't answer. He shook his head, and Anyette could almost see his mind deciding to take back the card. "So," she asked. "Do you paint?"

The moment dropped. Virmeer picked a tubular piece of working tech from one pocket and pressed a few buttons before setting it in the shower. Pieces of plaster and tile began to break away with high drilling noises. "Only bathrooms," he said.

* * *

Anyette worked in the corner of the bathroom, refinishing the tiles to the same black as the walls. She worked by hand, because it allowed her to give a more rustic style, and it took more time. It was a good thing that she had taken practical -- some designers brought in painting firms for wall and tile work.

Virmeer and his crew had left. She, too, was supposed to be gone; Brazamissio would be making her first stop at her new apartment this evening.

It was evening. Late evening. Anyette stepped into the bathtub so she could paint in the corner she had occupied. She swiped the brush back and forth, creating rough patches that would feel warm

under the feet. Leaning over, stretching for the still-white tiles, she pushed thought from her mind until boots stepped onto the tiles near the door.

Anyette straightened and turned. It was a security guard, like she'd expected, a lean woman whose clothing seemed too bulky for her. "Don't step on the black tiles," Anyette said. "They're still wet."

"What are you doing here?" The guard had her hand at her belt, but not on any weapon that Anyette could see.

She stood. "Finishing up," she said; it was obvious, after all. "Didn't they tell you to expect a delay? Idiot tech ate its own programming and forgot to do the floor. Paint won't dry for another hour. I don't want anyone on it."

Bending back, Anyette finished the side right of the tub. Then she stepped onto the white tiles, forcing the guard to back up. "Almost done," Anyette said. "There's the guest half-bath, if you need it."

She crouched to finish the tiles leading up to the door. There were only a few; quick work. The guard watched her and then retreated. Anyette heard her voice rising, answered by a languorous other. It called to mind a movie trailer, and Anyette promised herself that, were she ever called into the theatre industry, she would be the fast-action heroine famous for keeping her clothing on.

Stripping off her hat, she folded her glasses into a pocket and blinked; no contacts. She'd taken the dye from her hair, and it was as white as a fingernail clippings. Tapping the lid onto her paint can, she slipped her paint-crusted tools into a bag and sealed it before walking up the stairs of the entertainment room into the entry.

There was Brazamissio. Sixty years old, she had Anyette's face and a better body. Anyette wondered how much you had to pay before anti-aging tech became that good. "Dear God," the woman said, and the security guard hesitated.

Anyette stopped walking. "Thirty-two years ago, a starting actress donated a self-fertilised zygote to an infertile couple. My parents. I'm neither mad, a crazed fan, nor a victim of plastic surgery. I also designed the décor for this loft. Forgive my presence, but I was tidying up the master bath. You'll want to leave it for a few hours while the repainting dries."

"Dear God," Brazamissio repeated. It was a less pretentious sound than Anyette had expected. The security guard stepped away, her chocolate brow smoothing. "The birth clinic. I'd not . . .."

Anyette pulled a plastic sheet from her front pocket and tried not to feel the room's astonishment. As if she were someone else, someone impartial to the bizarre nature of the situation, she offered Brazamissio her card. "My office's location," she said. "In case you would like to forward me any clients. It was wonderful working for you. Good evening."

There was more information on that card than that. Anyette unlocked the door and stepped into the hall. It took effort to walk slowly. Now Brazamissio knew, and she could only hope Robotics Inc. did not.

The End

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Continued from page 17
matter falls from Titan's skies like manna from heaven.' If any planetary body in our system has a chance of recreating the process of life that occurred on Earth billions of years ago, it's Titan."

"Besides." Norris pushed up his wire rimmed glasses. "The probe just confirmed that Titan has plenty of methane and hydrocarbons, the building blocks of life."

"You guys already sound convinced. But even if you've got all this organic matter, the idea of life springing up in that frigid environment is a bit hard to imagine." He glanced at his notes. "A warm day on Titan is minus 292 degrees Fahrenheit. That's a harsh place to expect life to form."

Norris shrugged. "For a human, sure. But Titan life forms would be a lot different. They would breathe nitrogen and methane, maybe expelling oxygen as a by-product, and endure pressures one and half times as great as Earth. By comparison, your inner ear would implode after two days on the surface."

"After only forty eight hours?"

"Titan's days are sixteen Earth days long."

Lumins winced. "So you think that Titan will emulate Earth's primordial soup of 3 billion years ago?"

"That's what we hope," Coustakis said. "Of course we can't be certain. Most of these theories are based on data gathered by Voyager I in 1980. Huygens will give us the real information we need in order to make better guesses on what's happening on Titan."

"Guesses?"

"We'll never know for certain what course life has taken there until we can land ourselves and take samples."

"So, until then everything is just speculation?" Lumins asked.

"Pretty much," Miller interjected. He turned back to his monitor. "Show us your secrets, Prometheus," he intoned.

"Prometheus?"

"The origins of life. Kinda like receiving fire from the Gods."

Then the screen went blank.

***

Diamond-like hail, slanting nearly horizontal from the howling forager wind, slammed into the mountain of ice surrounding the cavern. The tiny jewels splintered and flake-sharp shards swirled in the entrance.

Karth eased back from the opening, moving softly to avoid causing tremors and dislodging stalactites from the corroded and crumbling roof. The silver-white scales of his skin rippled as he leaned back into a sitting shape against the wall, flowing into furrows and around nubs, settling until he was comfortable. His smooth, bulbous head eased against the ice. He glanced at his Elder-sib standing next to the opposite wall. "It'll pass soon," he shouted above the hurricane's roar.

Tor grunted. "Out of the clouds, into the ice," he groused, eying the sharp crystal ridges surrounding them.

Karth stifled a bellowing laugh. "Better here than out there," he said.

Tor frowned. "A crysstorm is nothing to laugh at."

"So you've told me . . . and told me." Karth answered with the glibness of a juvenile who has heard this point many times before.

"Then listen and learn. A storm this strong can flay the hide from an adult kraiten unlucky enough to be caught in one of its devil winds."

Karth shuddered and thought of Seraph. He had been forced to send the flying beast off to find its own shelter only moments before the storm shattered the silence of the high reaches. He watched Tor assume his habitual form, a deep squat shape that suited his sourness. Karth sympathized with his Elder-sib. By the time the storm passed, it could be full darkside and the high reaches were no place for morphs at night.

"I don't see why you wish to travel so high rotation after rotation," Tor said. "All you ever find is ice and snow. Nothing but garfus."

"Everything in the high reaches is junk to you, Tor," Karth answered good naturedly. "If it were up to you, we'd swim all day in the lowlands sea and wait for manna to fall into our mouths."

"I could do without that sort of excitement," Tor grumbled, pointing toward the entrance at the whirling slivers of crystal which trapped them in the cave. They seemed almost alive, as though looking for something to eviscerate.

Karth chuckled, careful to keep his voice soft so as not to cause a cave-in. "You're just getting too old and soft for thrills any more."

Tor frowned and stared at his Younger-sib, who was nearly thirty cycles his junior. He didn't bother to keep the scorn out of his voice. "You seem to have swallowed Callythia's notions that our world is part of a larger, even much vaster space than we inhabit."

Karth nodded. He liked the new Clan Leader, who had become chief when her Elder-sib died in a Darksider raid.

"Pfaa! There is only this frozen land and that cloud-filled sky out there. That is all anyone needs to know."

"Don't you ever wonder what lies beyond that cloud-filled sky?" Karth asked.

"I wonder about important things. Food and rest and the occasional raid against Darksiders so that the females can see I am worthy enough to meld with."

"You sound like someone who is afraid of the truth."

The upper part of Tor's body swelled. "You know I am unafraid of anything."

"Except crysstorms," Karth chided.

"Only a fool doesn't respect a forager wind and the storms it brings." The Elder-sib's face stretched into a sly, unaccustomed smile. "What hold does Callythia have over you that has you venturing up so high? Do you risk yourself and your steed because you seek a chance of melding with her?"

Karth felt the scales around his visual receptors grow warm. The barb had sunk home like a hunting spear. Perhaps Tor was right, at least a little bit. Karth stayed out long after he should have returned to the weir of his birth to rest in the warm sea cove during the long night. He rode Seraph to distraction on the off-chance of finding something pleasing for the new Clan Leader. Something important that would help prove her ideas. But he also believed in her. She sought an understanding beyond the frigid wastes of this world. She claimed that morphs were not alone in their ability to think. Why had the Great Ones given them sentience if they were not to use it to rise from their world and explore beyond the dense sky? To find a means to see beyond that haze was reason enough to challenge the high reaches.

He said none of this, knowing that Tor, like most of the Elders of the Clan, ridiculed such thinking. He shrugged, silver-white scales rippling in the faint light of the cave. "I like being up high, away from everyone else," he said. He turned away and stared silently into the storm.

The roar of the wind eased and Karth heard Tor's rhythmic breathing like a soft echo in the cavern. He turned a receptor toward his Elder-sib and noted he had closed down his senses to wait out the storm. The morph's scales were graying with age. He had entered a time of life when he

preferred the buoyancy of the denser, thicker air near the seas. But he was a good companion in a fight where ice weapons shattered easily. Tor could shift form quickly to shields and stabbing weapons and had even mastered throwing a ropey part of himself as a noose to trip an enemy.

A rattling sound echoed through the cave and a few ice jewels skittered near Karth. He extended an appendage and elongated two slender wands to pick up a frozen blue-green glob. He licked it tentatively and a pleasing flavor rolled across his taste receptors. Smiling, he popped the morsel into his mouth. He gathered more of the colorful allotropes and started munching on them.

The high-pitched keen of the storm slackened.

"Wind's changing," Karth announced between mouthfuls. He heard Tor shuffle behind him. "It won't be long now."

The diamond hail swirled suddenly away from the cavern and calm replaced the roar. Karth flowed upright and slid to the entrance. The tornadic winds dissipated along with the crystal shards. Receptors shifted through the spectrum, identifying bands of vapor in the muddy-orange atmosphere. Here and there, immense bubbles of water, some hundreds of kraiten lengths wide, drifted on the wind. Gas rose in dense, feathery columns toward a sky that was deepening toward sable. Zenith was past, and the long slide toward night was beginning.

Tor came up beside him, noting the change. "Light's fading. We'd best hurry if we're to make it home before darkside reaches us." His mouth formed lips and he whistled twice. Two sleek heads emerged from a crevice beside the cavern. The largest kraiten made a whiffling noise as it spied Karth on the ledge.

"Seraph," Karth crooned, and in the same breath pushed off the edge.

"Stop!" Tor yelled. He grabbed for his Younger-sib but was too late.

Karth laughed and fell slowly through the thick air. The kraiten slithered out of its hiding place. Scaly, silver-blue skin rippled; wings and tail extended to match a long sinewy neck and shovel-bladed head. Luminous eyes seemed to whirl with excitement. The mouth opened, revealing rows of curved teeth. A piercing roar bounced against the mountains of ice. Flapping its wings once, twice, to gain speed, the beast arrowed downward. It swooped beneath Karth, who settled softly on neck ridges that elongated and widened to form a saddle. Circling a column of gas, the pair rose steadily on outlying thermals until they were once more even with the ledge.

Tor sat astride Vesta, the beast's wings vaning idly to stay in one place. His face was set in a grimace of fury. He opened his mouth but his angry reprimand never materialized. He gasped and eyes riveted on something far away.

Karth twisted around and he saw it too--a sharp stab of light, tilting and tumbling through the sky; then it winked out behind jagged ridges of ice. He turned back, the planes of his face split in a huge smile.

"You saw it too?" Karth asked eagerly.

Tor nodded, unwilling to lie to his Younger-sib.

Karth whooped, the sound erupting in the quiet like a frozen sheet of water shattering.

"Quiet!" Tor roared. "It was nothing."

"It came from beyond the clouds."

Tor swallowed. "So what."

Karth's face assumed an unusual solemnity. "It's important. It's not from our world."

"It's not worth risking your life, Karth."

"Callythia says differently."

"Callythia!" Tor hissed, not bothering to hide his contempt. "She's bewitched you!"

"She's opened my eyes!"

Tor glared at his Younger-sib. "The Clan Leader is mistaken. There's nothing beyond the sky."

Karth eyed his Elder-sib as if measuring him. "You're just afraid. Your thinking's muddled by fear."

Tor's limbs quivered, translucent shapes rippling through the shadowy scales. He choked back a roar and turned away. Karth swallowed nervously and thought he had pushed his Elder-sib too far, but when he turned back his face was impassive. Tor stroked the neck of his kraiten. "What do you want to do, as if I have to ask?"

Karth hid his relief. "Whatever that was, I don't believe it was of this world and that's reason enough to find it and bring it back to the Clan. I'm going after it."

Tor saw the stubbornness in his Younger-sib, and he made one last try to deter him. "Looks like it landed near Corath's Fist. It'll be near full night by the time we find it. You won't be able to see a crysstorm forming; or you'll fly into a water bubble, become lost and drown before you can swim out of it."

Karth stared at the range of ice mountains at the edge of a vast plateau. They made a six fingered hand, the nails glowing violet in the fading sun. The thumb curved eternally backward, arching a little more each cycle, until one day the top knuckle would splinter and crack and fall thousands of lengths to the sea. All of the digits were eroding--the ice of this world's mountains always rotten and crumbling. If the object landed high in the range, the impact might bury it beneath a kraiten's weight of snow. Karth hoped it was farther down, where a glacier formed the plateau. That held its own dangers, being closer to the night boundary advancing steadily across the world.

"Best leave it to the Darksiders," Tor advised, as if sensing Karth's thoughts.

Scavengers! Karth scowled. He hated leaving anything to those animals. They floated with the world's rotation, always staying within the night and twilight. They were morphs, or something like them anyway, though primitive and barbaric in their customs. They ate their own dead.

"No!" he hissed. "They'll just destroy it. We have to go after it!"

***

"Darksiders," Tor said flatly, and pointed to tracks that surrounded a shallow indentation in the ice.

Karth counted four pairs of feet pushing and pulling something through the snow. He swiveled his head toward an icy scarp in the direction of deepening shadows. He felt his breath go tight in his lungs.

"How long ago?"

Tor squinted against the fading glare of a far distant sun. "Not too long. But it's getting on toward the sleep cycle. What we should be doing instead of hanging around up here." He turned, a puzzled frown on his face. "What would Darksiders want with this mysterious object of yours that they would risk emerging from full night to get it?"

Karth shrugged. "Maybe they realize its importance, even if you refuse to accept it."

Tor scowled, but stayed quiet.

Karth studied the sky. "Darksiders don't ride kraiten, so they can't have gotten very far."

"Far enough with the night boundary coming this way."

"But not at it yet." Karth pushed off and floated onto Seraph. Keeping his voice even he said, "I'm going."

Tor didn't move. "Two against four . . . I don't like the odds."

Karth grinned suddenly. "It'll be like hunting crystal serpents at dawn. The Darksiders will

be worn out and too lethargic to move."

***

Karth watched from behind a wind sculpted dune of ice and snow. Below them, Corath's palm cast a purple glow in the shadowy twilight. Three of the Darksiders lay against the snow, their exhausted bodies oozing into amorphous puddles. The object was next to them. Wind had buried it partially under a drift of snow. Karth could make out a long tube connecting a large bulbous shape at one end, and a smaller knob at the other. It gleamed like polished ice. A tiny beam of light blinked on the large end.

"See," he whispered excitedly to Tor. "It couldn't possibly be from our world."

Tor grunted and continued scanning the cliffs and ridges in the dying sunlight. "Where's the fourth Darksider?"

"Probably sent on ahead for help."

"Maybe. Or he could be acting as lookout. We need to know for certain."

Lightning zig-zagged through the sky, leaving a violet trail in the brown-orange atmosphere. A swelling forager wind sent crystalline plumes of snow twirling across the slipface of the dune. Karth looked up and noted the beginnings of a crysstorm at the fingertips of the Fist. The swirling typhoon of ice crystals shaded the gathering dusk with the malevolence of its fury.

"We haven't much time before that storm reaches us," Karth said impatiently. He nodded toward the Darksiders. "They're in no shape to fight. We'll rush them. Our kraitens should be able to lift the object and be away before they know what struck them."

Tor shook his head.

"I don't like our chances. The fourth Darksider could slip in behind us and slit us open before we can change shape to protect ourselves. Besides, I don't think our beasts can lift that thing and carry us at the same time."

But Karth didn't hear. He was already sliding down the dune toward the kraitens. Tor cursed silently and caught up with him. He whirled the younger morph around. Karth started to say something but Tor cut him off.

"I suppose you'll go through with your foolhardy idea no matter what I say. But I'm still the Elder of this team and we'll do it my way."

Karth had never seen his Elder-sib so adamant before. He swallowed his protests and kept quiet.

"I'll float in, full view, no cover. Darksiders are predictable. All three will come after me. I'll string them out along the glacier. As tired as they look, it shouldn't be a problem staying ahead of them. When they've left, you come in with Seraph and Vesta and hoist that thing out of there. Keep your guard up. That fourth Darksider could be out there, anywhere. I'll meet you at Corath's thumb. Be quick. I don't want to be trapped on the glacier's rim. It's a long way down to the ocean from there." The smoky scales of his face crinkled in a grim smile.

***

Karth waited behind the snow dune until he heard shouts. He urged Seraph high. Vesta swept his huge wings beside them. Corath's Fist already cast long shadows into its palm and it was hard to see anything other than flickers of movement. Overhead, lightning struck a bubble of gas, sending a giant fireball roaring skyward. The light showed Tor skimming the ice. He had morphed

his legs into thin, flat slabs and was skiing ahead of the Darksiders who floundered after him. The violent flash went out and all Karth could see were dark ghosts against the almost-blue ice. He nudged Seraph and the beast winged toward the object, Tor's kraiten just behind.

Karth leapt onto the snow and slid down to the object. He extended fingers and caressed the surface. It was nearly smooth and very hard, without any of the ever present erosion of his own world's ice. Long strips of the hard material braced the two globular ends and formed a lattice that could be used to carry it. Lost in awe of this thing, he almost did not hear Seraph's impatient crooning.

He motioned the two kraitens to take positions toward the front and rear of the object. Their talons extended and wrapped around the bulbous parts. Karth worked his way into the bracing and positioned the claws so that they gripped the object's lattice more firmly. Then he climbed back out and stood beside the thing, admiring it.

Seraph bellowed.

Karth instinctively threw himself to one side as a club smashed into the object. He rolled onto his feet. Seraph began to let go of the object. Karth yelled at the beast to lift skyward. The two kraiten strained against the weight. The Darksider came at him again. Two limbs formed sharp crystal blades. Karth extended a thin and flexible spear and waited. The blades hacked at him; Karth leaned backward, the sharp edges missing him by fractions. In the same instant he thrust the spear forward, stabbing the Darksider in the chest. The scavenger screamed, and a yellow fluid spattered the snow.

Karth retracted his spear and formed a club, which whirled once and slammed into the Darksider's head. Yellow fluid splashed onto Karth, and the scavenger sagged into a shapeless mass. Karth ran to the object, which had risen only a little ways above his head. He jumped upward and grabbed the small end. The object dipped dangerously, and his feet scraped the ice before he felt himself lifted. He clambered to the top and rode there like he was surfing the ocean.

Seraph and Vesta labored under the great weight. Karth swore. Tor had been right--the two beasts could not carry the object and both of the morphs. One of them would have to stay behind.

Lightning crackled in the air. The storm, gathered at the tip of Corath's Fist, now headed into the valley of the hand. Winds whipped at the two kraitens, who were hard-pressed to stay airborne. Karth pointed in the direction of the thumb and the beasts flew at it, managing to stay just in front of the storm.

Slowed by the heavy weight, the two kraitens were taking longer than anticipated to reach the rendezvous. Karth scanned the glacier nervously, looking for some sign of Tor. The beasts curved around a shelf of ice out of the wind. In the distance, Karth spotted the Thumb, a pinnacle of snow and ice thrusting out of the plateau. He heard shouts, and spied the three Darksiders first. They had cornered Tor beside the Thumb at the edge of the vast cliff that fell to the sea. Splashes of yellow mottled his scales, and Karth glimpsed a jagged wound in his side. Yet, the Elder-sib still whirled and slashed at his attackers as though possessed of youth and energy. Appendages formed two wickedly curved blades. He feinted at one Darksider and cut back at the other two. A huge gash spilled one of the scavenger's guts onto the snow. He flopped once and lay still.

Karth let go from his perch and slammed onto a slope of ice with a great shout. He rolled onto his feet and slid toward Tor, his arms already brandishing weapons. The remaining Darksiders fled.

Karth ran up to his Elder-sib, who lay against the snow, life fluid oozing out of him. Karth turned to shout for Seraph, but Tor stopped him.

"It's too late." He shook his head. "I'm hurt deep inside."

Karth didn't say anything. He stared into lengthening shadows, spreading across the

glittering ice.

"This thing of yours from beyond the clouds, is it really that important?" Tor asked.

Karth nodded. "The Clan Leader," he started to say, and then stopped. "It's our future."

Tor nodded back. "I'm too old for the future." He coughed up yellow fluid and was still for awhile. Then, "Karth, you were right. I was afraid. The sight of that twisting fire lighting up the sky made me feel like a helpless newborn. The idea that some other creatures made this thing and sent it to our world scared me." He tried to ease into a better position and groaned. "It would have been nice to sleep in the weir one last time."

He pointed at the object and whispered, "Make certain Callythia gets it." And he was still.

***

Karth secured Tor to the object and signaled the kraiten to take off. Wings strained against the heavy load. As soon as the beasts cleared the ground they skimmed over the ice cliff and plummeted toward the sea.

Karth watched them disappear into the violet night. The forager wind began to howl and needle-like crystals whirled around him, stinging his skin. He eased himself over the crag, elongating a limb until he found a vertical crack. He squeezed into it and started the long climb down the ice face. He wouldn't beat the storm, but the fissure should offer some protection. His own safety wasn't important. What truly mattered was saving the object, and his Elder-sib's body, from the scavenging Darksiders.

Tor was right, Karth thought to himself. *Creatures who can make something like that object, which penetrated our world so easily, are dangerous.* Karth understood now that the morphs must learn as much as they could about these outsiders through their artifacts in order to protect this world in the future. He looked upward as though his receptors could penetrate the gloom of storm and night, past dense clouds into a region beyond the frozen globe. He imagined a vast realm that morphs would visit someday.

***

Miller rested his hand on Nina Coustakis's shoulder. "Sorry, Boss. The computers check out at this end. And Norris just got off the line with Paris. They told him the signal just cut out. Probably the antennae were damaged in the landing. If that's the case, Huygens is probably off-line for good."

The newspaper reporter stared blankly at her. "Is that possible?" Lumins asked.

Coustakis nodded. The icy pit in her stomach would not go away; nor would the reporter.

"How 'd it happen?" he pressed.

Coustakis straightened, found her teaching voice. "There was no way to plan a landing since no one knew what the surface was like. Anything could have happened."

Miller grimaced. "Seven years and nearly a billion dollars wasted." He turned away and went to his own desk.

Coustakis shut down her monitor. She half-smiled at the rest of her team, now gathered around her desk. "We'll come back here tomorrow and try to make sense of what data we did get."

There was a great, sad nodding and shaking of heads. A cold numbness swept through the room. She waved and said, "Good night." Lumins left with her.

Miller waved and went over to his own machine. The other team members filed slowly out of the lab. He looked up and noticed Norris staring at his monitor. "C'mon, Norris," he said. "Let's get

drunk. Forget this for a while."

Norris didn't answer. He had pushed his face right up the screen, and was peering at an image captured in the swirling, shining ethane crystals of Titan.

Miller came over and stood behind him. "What is it?"

"The last image we received just before everything went blank," Norris answered

Miller shrugged. "Okay. But what is it?"

Norris turned his face upward, deep lines furrowing his brow. "It looks like a dragon."

The End

Leave a message about this story.

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movements.

Gusts of air from the dragon's rapid approach blasted him. Leaves lifted in the air. The dragon skidded through the meadowgrass, tearing huge furrows of soil with his hind legs, and came to a rattling halt. His frontward momentum carried him end over end, and he landed on his belly with a grating thud, less than ten strides from Willec.

"Oh, no! Dragon!" Two boys rushed out from beneath the shadows of trees, not far from where Willec stayed concealed.

The smaller boy knelt beside the dragon. "Are you hurt?" The dragon cooed low in his throat and lifted his large, hard muzzle onto the boy's shoulder.

Willec blinked. And blinked again.

"He's well enough. Still can't land worth a dilly, though." The older of the two boys gently helped the dragon fold his wings and regain his feet.

"His mother will help him learn."

The mother! Scanning the sky, Willec couldn't keep quiet any longer and allow harm to come to these children due to their ignorance. "I'd get away from that dragon if I were you." He stepped into the sunlight.

Two pairs of green eyes snapped onto him. Yet rather than move away from the little beast, both boys shifted in front of him. The dragon craned his long neck around the taller boy's hip and looked at Willec with large golden eyes.

Willec's lips twitched.

Reaching behind him, the younger boy stroked the skeletal joint of the dragon's wing. His eyes never left Willec. Such bravado in one so young. He looked to have seen eleven, possibly twelve years. And the older boy, only a couple of years more.

Shaking his head, Willec took a step closer. "Look, here. You boys don't know what you're doing. You don't want to be around when that dragon's mama comes back."

The boys shared a knowing look. The older visibly relaxed. "But that's what we're trying to do: find Dragon a mother."

Willec's brows rose.

The older boy smiled. "We found Dragon close to a year past. A bone in his wing was broken. So Jase, here, decided we should take him home with us."

"Your parents allowed you to keep a dragon?"

"Ah, well . . . ma won't refuse Jase when he's really got his heart set on something." The older boy winked at Jase.

Jase grinned back, sitting beside his dragon. Willec noted the dark hollows below the boy's eyes, the pallid skin.

Jase shook blond hair back from his eyes. "Dragon's wing has been healed for a while now. It's time for him to find a mother."

Again, the brothers shared a glance. "But I don't think it will be today," the older said.

"But, Cyle, it has to be!"

Cyle crouched beside his brother and stroked the dragon. "Dragon's been flying around all day. I just don't think there're any dragons around here or they would have heard him."

"It has to be now. Let's go closer to the nesting grounds."

Cyle's lip twisted. "That will take another day. Ma will worry."

"She knows I have to do this. She'll understand."

"No, she won't!" Cyle's chin quivered.

Willec looked from one boy to the other. He felt drawn to the younger boy's gaze. Long

sought-for hope blossomed inside his chest as though he was on the precipice and could reach out and grasp that intangible something . . . Either that, or fall.

Tears shimmered in Jase's large eyes. Cyle's fists clenched. "We'll move closer to the nesting grounds and see if we can find Dragon a mother tomorrow. Tomorrow will be soon enough, won't it?"

"It will, Cyle! I know it will!" Jase's smile suffused his entire face with light. "Do you hear that, Dragon? You'll have your own mother by tomorrow." He pressed his forehead to Dragon's hard leathery muzzle. Puffs of breath from the creature's nostrils lifted his hair.

Jase lifted his head. "It will work, Cyle. It has to."

Frowning, Cyle slanted a glance at Willec. "Don't worry. Dragon will get his mother."

Willec didn't know what compelled him, but he knelt beside them. "Would it help if I came along? I mean . . ." He offered his hand. "I'm Willec, just a simple traveler . . . but I'd like to come along. I'd like to see a dragon return to its kind."

Cyle eyed him warily.

Jase's head bobbed up and down. He coughed and sank back against the small dragon.

Brows furrowed, Cyle looked at his brother. "You're certain?"

Jase turned a penetrating gaze on Willec. Willec stared hard into the green depths. For the trace of a moment it seemed the child delved into the deep recesses of his soul, then the feeling evaporated. Willec couldn't fathom why he had requested to go along, but then, what did it matter? He had nothing but time.

"Yes. I'm sure. Let him come. Please."

"Very well, Jase. He can come."

A discomforting feeling of relief swept through Willec.

* * *

They walked until daylight faded, traveling slowly. Jase's weakened condition became ever more apparent. Cyle carried both his and Jase's packs. They rested frequently so he could catch his breath. The dragon remained a constant at Jase's side, taking what must be achingly slow steps for a vigorous dragon. Jase leaned often against Dragon while the beast stood patiently still. They stopped early and let the boy sleep awhile before waking him for supper.

Willec banked the fire and sat back against his travel pack. Across the fire, Jase bent forward, coughing. Through Jase's thin homespun shirt, Willec could see the boy's ribs as his body tightened with each wracking fit. The coughs had begun at dusk and had been increasing.

Dragon paced behind Jase's back.

"Here, let me help." Cyle put down a stack of dead branches and knelt behind Jase.

Willec shot to his feet when Cyle began pounding Jase's back. "What are you doing? Doesn't the boy suffer enough?"

Both boys stared up at him.

"It doesn't hurt," Jase said. "Cyle cups his hands."

After a moment, Willec lowered back to the ground. "Sorry."

Cyle shrugged. "A healer taught my ma to do this. It breaks up the nasty muck clogging his lungs."

Jase coughed. If anything, it sounded worse. He bent over, his young features contorted. Hands covering his mouth, he lunged to his feet and ran out of the circle of firelight. Dragon followed at his heels.

Willec tried to ignore the sound of retching. "How long has he been ill like that?"

Cyle glanced up. "All his life. It's worse at night."

"But I'm blessed," Jase said, returning to the fire. He slumped down next to Cyle. Dragon curled around them, pronged tail encircling the brothers. His head rested on Jase's thigh. Jase stroked the gleaming supple scales.

"Blessed?" Willec said.

Jase smiled. "All men are given challenges they must learn to endure. I'm blessed because I know what mine is. Some are not so fortunate."

Frowning, Willec contemplated the boy's words.

"What of you?" Cyle said. "You wear the cloak of an armsman. Have you come from the borderlands?"

Willec rubbed the hem of his badly worn and faded cloak. "I was there."

"And it still holds?" Jase's pale features flushed with excitement.

"The border holds."

"When I'm of age, I'll serve my time as an armsman." Cyle's spine straightened.

"You should stay home. It's not as glorious as it sounds."

"But it's a noble cause."

"Ah, yes. To protect our liberties and keep safe the lives of our wives, mothers, and children," Willec said in derision.

"What's wrong with that?" Cyle rebuked.

Willec met Cyle's eyes over the flames. "You don't know anything about war or violence. I was once as naïve as you, held those same ideals to my heart. I went proudly to serve at the borderlands and witnessed such atrocities in the name of peace . . ." He closed his eyes. For what? To return to his wife who had taken another? His son who called another man "Father"? That was the freedom and the ideals he defended the borders for.

The boys looked away. Another coughing spasm overtook Jase, interrupting the quiet of the crackling fire. When the fit ceased, Cyle pulled Jase back against his shoulder.

"What will you do now?" Jase asked Willec, his voice raspy.

Pulling a stick from the flames, Willec watched the burning end as he twirled it. "They say the new king is blessed above all men by the Mother Of All."

"The Infant King?" Jase asked.

Willec nodded. "To look upon him, one can glimpse the miracle of the creations and everything the Mother Of All holds in reverence. I wish to see this king."

The brothers looked at each other.

"What if . . ." Jase hesitated. "Suppose you see this king . . . and all you see is just a baby?"

"Then . . ." Willec looked down at his hands. "Then . . . I don't know. I don't know."

Jase looked thoughtful. Dragon's eyes slowly closed. "I'd like to touch a grown dragon. To glide my hands across its scales, feel the heat from its body."

"Jase, we talked about this. We can't get that close," Cyle said.

Jase frowned.

"But you'll see an adult from a safe distance. Tomorrow. I promise."

"What makes you think a female will accept your dragon?" Willec said, immediately regretting it from the stricken look on Jase's face.

Cyle scowled. "Dragons aren't like birds. They're much more intelligent. Dragon will find a mother."

Jase nodded as another cough wracked his young form.

They slept little through the night. Jase's worsening cough kept them awake. They started out early, their pace slower than before. Soft meadowgrass gave way to hard soil that was thin over rocks. The trees stood silent behind them, growing smaller with each step.

His young features creased with worry, Cyle hovered near Jase.

Dragon squealed, a mournful sound, just before Jase slumped to the ground. Dropping to his knees, Cyle skidded beside him, pulling Jase into his arms. "We'll stop here." His voice held a hint of a tremor.

"No! You promised!" Jase's lips trembled. His eyes looked huge in his lean, pale face.

Cyle nodded. Tears welled in his eyes. "It's not much farther. I'll carry you."

Willec leaned over them. "I'll help."

A tear tracked down his cheek when Cyle looked up. "I've got him."

Putting his palm over Cyle's shoulder, Willec nodded and silently took their packs.

Cyle lifted Jase in his arms and headed off across the stony soil. The boy's legs dangled lifelessly.

Occupied with his own thoughts, Willec lost track of how long they walked, when he head Cyle whisper, "We're here."

Craggy cliffs loomed above them, rocky spires breaking into the skyline. Dragons sailed the blue expanse, soaring among fluffy clouds. Others sprawled across stony ledges, sunning glittering bodies that gleamed iridescent colors as they stretched, lengthening rippling muscles.

"Jase, do you see?" Cyle's voice was thick.

Jase's head lifted weakly. "I see them." His hand dropped to Dragon's head. "You've got to go, Dragon. Go find your ma." His voice was barely a whisper.

Dragon hopped from side to side.

"Go on."

"Go, Dragon!" Cyle shouted. "Fly!"

With a squeal that sounded more like a whine, Dragon backed away, turned and took to the air.

They watched in wonder as a silverback veered away from the others and flew toward the small dragon. Three times his size, she soared around him, sniffing, nudging, inspecting.

Frightened, Dragon shrieked, hovering in the air, wings flapping. The silverback slowed and rubbed her great neck across Dragon's.

"Why did you never give him a name?" Willec asked lamely.

"Ma didn't want us to get too attached." Cyle's gaze never left the flying dragons.

Abruptly, another dragon launched itself from the cliffs and streaked toward Dragon and the silverback; a glistening black male, clawing the air in agitation. His trumpeting warning sent shivers along Willec's skin. The silverback bellowed at the male, powerful jaws snapped near his throat with a thunderous clap.

Dragon raced across the air currents, streaming toward the ground, the silverback fast behind, her greater speed overtaking.

Dragon turned, back flapping, wings rounded. His feet kicked forward and he slowed, touching the rocky soil with a gentle hop.

"He landed!" Jase cried.

Pulses of air whooshed over them as the silverback landed. The ground vibrated beneath them.

"Don't move," Willec hissed.

The silverback sniffed Dragon, arching her spine.

Bouncing from foot to foot, Dragon looked at the boys.

"Go on!" Jase rasped. "She'll be your ma."

Dragon craned his neck toward the adult dragon. Her muzzle lowered to his. She sniffed, smoothing Dragon's young scales, then moved over him, enfolding him in the protection of her body.

The rocky soil shook. Pebbles bounced, clattering upon the ground. Air whooshed around them. The black dragon stood before them, puffing out his glistening body and fully extending his great leathery wings.

The female rounded out her greater size. Arching her neck, she trumpeted through her nasal cavities before snorting a gale of steaming air at the male.

Willec's heart flew up into his rib cage.

The black male dragon rocked from side to side, his head lowered toward Dragon who pressed back against the inside of the silverback's legs. The male snorted a short puff of air. Gray eyes turned toward Willec and the boys.

Dragon squealed and ran toward them, his body and tail circled around the brothers. The boys' eyes were huge.

"Remain still," Willec whispered.

The black dragon rumbled deep within like stones scraping inside a barrel, and inhaled through his nostrils. The silverback snapped her jaws at him just as his head swiveled toward the boys and Dragon. He hopped back, wings flapping wildly. She snapped again. And again, driving him back. He trumpeted, enraged. The silverback held her ground. The adult dragons glared at each other, muscles coiled, wreathing beneath their slick scaly bodies.

Eyes narrowing to slits, the male snorted. A blast of steam rolled over the silverback and he turned away, walked several paces, and flapped into the tranquil blue.

Her great neck swooping down, the silverback stepped toward the brothers. Her head lowered to their level. Golden eyes studied them.

"It's your ma, Dragon," Cyle said. Dragon stepped hesitantly away from the boys. His snout met hers and she rumbled from deep within.

Jase collapsed against Cyle. "I want to touch her," Jase said, his voice barely audible.

Cheeks moist with tears, Cyle nodded and lifted his brother to his feet. Jase's hand lifted toward the dragon, then fell back to his side. Taking Jase's hand in his own, Cyle brought it to the silverback. Together, they touched her jaw. The giant head flinched, then relaxed. Dragon's tongue flicked across Jase's palm. The silverback nudged her head back toward their hands.

Frozen, Willec watched; his throat constricted, face wet with tears. A fountain of emotions flooded his soul. Here, in the majesty of two young boys, was all the meaning he had sought.

Jase's head lolled forward, his shoulders went limp.

Cyle sank to the ground, cradling Jase, and wept, the great dragon forgotten.

Dragon whined, nosing Jase's fingers.

With rare gentleness, the silverback laid her snout against Jase's chest. For a moment she stayed there. Hot exhalations washed over them. Cyle's wet face turned up to her, staring into the shiny sphere of her eye. Then she turned to Dragon and nudged him away. Together they flapped into the air, trumpeting a long, mournful, piercing note. Gusts from their wing beats wafted over the boys, blowing through their clothing.

Cyle smoothed the hair back from Jase's smooth forehead before turning glistening eyes to Willec.

Kneeling, Willec placed a hand on Cyle's shoulder. "Let's take him home."

The End

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detached – like a cobbler studying the stitching of a shoe fold.

Keeping his eyes on Halesowen, Jaylin lingered. Captain Halesowen spotted him. A peculiar look came over his face, as if he were struggling to remember where he'd seen him before. Jaylin kept eye contact with him and gave him a nod.

Halesowen motioned to one of his officers. "Search the Cougar and arrest anyone who has even a rag of mystaqua. Go."

The company of legion sheriffs broke into a quick jog. Half of them surrounded the inn, going down the alleys and converging at the rear while four officers stormed the front door. Halesowen, however, remained behind and walked straight up to Jaylin.

"Do you remember me?"

Halesowen nodded, his eyes narrowing. "How did you find me, Atabyrion? I see you cut your hair."

"The City is thick with spies, Captain. You of all people should know that."

Halesowen looked at the scar on Jaylin's cheek. "Looks like you've been keeping yourself busy. What do you want?"

"I think you know already, don't you?"

Halesowen's eyes glittered. "You want to see her."

Jaylin nodded, feeling his stomach thrill. He guarded his features. Best not to let the captain know too much. "I knew you were an intelligent man. I will be at the Bright Well every evening for the next four days. Do you know the place?"

"An Espion safehouse? Why not a lazar house instead?"

Jaylin swallowed. He knew he needed to be very careful. "I tried to arrange one, but they were already full. Tell her she can contact me there, and that I'll gladly meet her someplace…in the open. I'm sure she can arrange for it. Did you get all that?"

Jaylin saw the legion sheriff's neck muscles tighten. "Yes, I did, you little moth. She was right, you know. I didn't believe her, but she said you'd be looking for her ere the week was out. How in Aster's name she knows these things, I can't imagine." There was sudden commotion in the Cougar, yells and hollers of surprise, but the sheriffs were quick and ruthless.

"I'm glad she remembered me. She made quite a first impression."

The glimmer of an amused smile wavered on Halesowen's mouth. "You're a mouthy lad, Atabyrion. I'm of a mind to forget I saw you."

"Well, I will be at the Bright Well, and I will see Lady Minya eventually. I'm certain that if she knew you refused to pass on my invitation, she would be rather... upset."

Halesowen smirked. "You're just a little wretch, Atabyrion, playing a game of blindman's tag on a slanted roof. I don't think you know how dangerous that is. Especially in Minya."

"Trust me, Captain," Jaylin replied, pretending to scratch the scabbed-over stitches, "I can take a fall."

Halesowen smiled wickedly. "Then I suppose it's up to her to see if you land on your feet. Or your face." He turned and strode into the Cougar, throwing the door open and letting it slam against the wall. "Debahn! What's in the satchel? Have a look, Grannin, will you?"

Jaylin stood still, savoring the taste of success. In a few days or even sooner, he'd meet her face to face. How many Espion could have done it? Not bloody many, he was sure of that. Were the others still garnering clues from Kalisha's manor house? Or trailing after every green-eyed beauty in the City? He glanced across the street to make sure Thasos had seen everything. The guardsman had and nodded slightly. But as Jaylin glanced toward the inn, he thought he saw a dark-haired man duck into an alley next to the inn across the street. He recognized him.

Ethen.

* * *

As Jaylin watched Ethen disappear, anger smoldered in his chest. That man was starting to irritate him. Shoving off from the wall, Jaylin strode across the street and gave a subtle nod for Thasos to follow. By the time he reached the door, the Queen's captain met him.

"You look angry. What happened?"

"The watcher who followed me last night just ducked into this alley. I'd like to talk to him about his manners."

"There's nothing nicer than a good beating between friends," Thasos said with a feisty grin as they marched toward the alley. "I'll hold him while you kick in his ribs."

"Wait behind me a moment," Jaylin advised. "He may bolt if he sees us both."

"You're hardly in a position to order *me* around," Thasos replied, following him.

Jaylin grinned wolfishly and turned into the alley. Vagrants cluttered the pathway, clutching blankets that smelled strongly of mead and spilled beer. A broken wagon leaned against one side with someone crouched down behind it. Jaylin gazed at the row of bodies, some snoring, others writhing in a stupor. An act? A trap? Jaylin hesitated. The one behind the wagon may have been Ethen. But then again...

Jaylin's nerves went taut as he saw faces rise from dark cowls and stare at him with contempt. He steeled his courage and entered the alley. Nudging a splintered board with the toe of his boot, he shoved it away and a rat skittered from beneath it with an angry hiss. He listened for the slightest movement, scanning for any possible attack. Some streets of Abyri were more dangerous than others. But this was Minya. Watching the wagon, he approached it cautiously. If Ethen was going to fight, he was ready.

The one against the wall behind the wagon hunkered further into the crevice, and Jaylin prepared to tackle him. He motioned toward the wagon and Thasos blinked and nodded subtly, loosening the highlander in its scabbard. The two Atabyrions stalked closer. Jaylin came around the wagon, watching for weapons, and saw a sickly beggar wrapped in a smelly cloak. He had reddish hair, a coarse beard, and a terrified look on his face. He whimpered and opened his eyes wider. His thick bushy eyebrows arched. Jaylin paused. No, Ethen was much larger than this man.

With a timid voice the beggar whispered, "He's over there," and pointed to the wall behind them.

The rustle of fabric whispered from behind and Thasos crashed into the wagon and fell in. Ethen shoved past Jaylin and sprinted down the alley away from the Cougar. Jaylin recovered and pounced like a cat, grabbing Ethen's cloak as it whipped behind him. Ethen jerked backwards, and Jaylin tackled him. They wrestled, and Jaylin landed three punches until Ethen broke free and staggered to his feet. Jaylin got up as quickly as he could, but the man was already running.

The vagrants scrambled in every direction, trying to get away from the violence and the possible danger of being mixed with it. Jaylin shoved past a man and ran after the spy. He was spry and quick, but Jaylin was younger and a good runner. Turning down a side alley, Ethen cut down it and hurried faster, but Jaylin caught up to him in several strides and tackled him again. They both went down, heaving and swearing. Again Ethen disentangled himself and rose. But he didn't run. Jaylin advanced, cocking his fists. He was furious.

"All right, you craven idiot," Jaylin snapped, "you're certainly not a dockhand."

Ethen glared and started retreating, but Jaylin lunged and swung. Without knowing how, Jaylin felt Ethen flip him over and slam him against the cobblestone road. He hit the curving cobbles

hard and lights spattered in his eyes with the shock of it. As he tried to rise, his arms were suddenly pinned with pain and he couldn't move.

"There's a lad," Ethen growled in his ear. "Why don't I break your arm, eh?"

Jaylin heard the sound of bootsteps running toward them and the sound of a sword ringing clear of its scabbard. "Let the lad go. You're under arrest, by order of the Queen's guard."

The pain in Jaylin's arms subsided and the pressure he felt on his back eased.

Ethen glanced at Thasos and the gleaming blade. And bolted down the alley.

"Are you all right, lad?" Thasos demanded, reaching down for his friend.

Jaylin painfully rose to his knees and nodded, gasping. His shoulder and back felt like they were on fire. "Sweet Aster, that hurt," he muttered and staggered to his feet. His legs wobbled, and Thasos helped straighten him. Chasing after Ethen would not have been possible. "Was he alone?" Jaylin dusted himself off, feeling the sizzling pain start to subside. "It felt like I ran into a wall."

"He was the only one I saw. If you're up to it, let's chase him down."

"No, it would be a waste of time. Aster's wrath, that hurt." The sun was fading quickly. "He's gone by now, and it's starting to get late. I think we have just enough time to reach the Bright Well before curfew."

"Don't worry about Curfew. The Queen's guard is immune. But let's get away from here. No sense waiting around for the sheriffs to come wondering."

After walking for a distance, the normal feelings returned to Jaylin's joints and he felt much better. He thought about what had happened and couldn't understand how the man had thrown him. Jaylin had never fought someone like that before. He buried the memory in the garden of his mind to sift through later. Leaving the alley, they crossed West-Allen gate and joined the thick crowds in the Tier of Minya. East, toward Mist Dock and then north along the Median wall. Jaylin explained where the Espion inn was.

"Before we go much father, tell me about Halesowen," Thasos asked. "I'm not sure how much longer I can dawdle in this Tier."

"Halesowen is amiable enough, I suppose. Good thing he remembered me from the ship and said he'd get a message to her. He also said that she knew I'd be looking for her. I don't know how long it will take to reach her. Maybe several days."

Thasos winced. "I'll stay as long as I can, but the King's Will meets next week and I need to be there. If you haven't heard from her by then, maybe you will at Shallic Palace. I'm sure she finds a way to attend."

"If I'm close to finding Kalisha, I'll skip this one," Jaylin said, leading Thasos toward the Espion safehouse.

Just as the sky darkened over their heads, they found the cheery rooms of the Bright Well. Jaylin needed a firm back rub from Reonna, and he anticipated it with relish. His shoulder muscles felt tangled. Gazing up at the roof, he saw the window he had looked out from the night he first arrived. He grinned in spite of himself.

So many things had changed in just a few days. He was working for a clever Prince and his Espion. He'd made an enemy of a Mark. He'd befriended the Captain of the Queen's Guard and a legion sheriff Captain. When he tallied it like that, he was pleased by his successes. If he could find Kalisha, though – that would assure him a place in the City. A place of importance – not with some small guild in a small city of a small country. Being a legion sheriff had given him a smattering of importance. Especially solving the Wumsiah abduction. But if he could solve the king's problem too, despite his Atabyrion background, that was well enough for starters. Walking through the main doors of the huge stone and timber building, he inhaled the comforting smells. It was large and spacious,

not as crowded as some of the other inns, and he could hear happy voices and the chink of goblets.

Jaylin scanned the room and caught Reonna approaching him with a grin and a look of astonishment. She met him at the door with a finger on her lips.

"He arrived a quarter of an hour ago complaining about you. What have you done to upset the Espion, Jaylin?" She covertly pointed toward a table in the rear.

Jaylin saw Ethen sitting at the table with a huge goblet. He looked animated and was talking quickly to the different women surrounding him. Jaylin noticed the ring flash on his left hand. An Espion ring. Jaylin knew he was right after all. Patting Reonna's hand, he thanked her with a whisper. "Thasos," he said quietly, "Go wait at that corner table, but keep your eyes open. I have a little business to attend to."

"Why don't I throw him out on the street for you?"

"I wanted to give him a warning first before I let you at him."

Thasos nodded and Reonna escorted the guardsman to a side table.

Jaylin strode up silently behind Ethen. The man set down his drink, shaking his head with a chuckle and scratched the spiky brown hair and the nape of his neck. The women surrounding him looked at Jaylin with startled surprise. A shadow fell across the table, and Ethen looked over his shoulder to see who was behind him. When he saw Jaylin, he couldn't contain the look of sudden shock. Many wrinkles furrowed his brow, but he calmed himself quickly.

"I'm amazed you even passed the Measure, Ethen. I thought the Espion trained their spies better than that. Why didn't you just tell me you were working for Jevin? You must have known I was."

"You're not Espion yet."

"I was here at the Bright Well several days ago with Guyaume Reim. You're saying you didn't know who I was? Do I look daft, Ethen?"

His eyebrow twitched and a look of rage started in his eyes. "You're the lad he brought," he whispered. "You're the one." He shook his head and chuckled cynically. "That explains a lot. By the bloody Veil…"

"Come, Ethen. I can smell horse hock when I step in it." He felt anger and betrayal. So Jevin did not trust him. Maybe he was not the man Jaylin thought he was. "Tell Jevin that if he wants to know what I'm doing in the future, to ask. I don't appreciate inept scullery rags watching every move I make." Jaylin turned to join Thasos. He tried to bridle his fury but he was too angry. Spies watching spies. It was sickening.

"Hold a moment," Ethen snapped and Jaylin paused. The room went silent. "Jevin did not send me to spy on you. My man Wess caught you with a member of the Queen's guard yesterday morning on Runner's Bridge. They thought you were just a paid errand or something until you were seen entering the Steene. That's when I was notified. I sent someone after the guardsman while I stayed and followed you to that inn last night. I had no idea you were the boy Guyaume brought back or what Tier he had stationed you in. You didn't respond to any of the signs, and you didn't show a ring mark on your hand. Not every Espion in the Tier of Minya stays here and would have known you from your arrival."

"You didn't know about me?" Jaylin asked, watching for any sign of a lie.

Ethen shook his head. "I sent a report about you to Jevin last night, mentioning the name you gave me. I'm expecting a reply from him tonight. If I'm telling the truth, Jevin's messenger will confirm what I've said." The wrinkles in his forehead smoothed. "But it raises some serious questions," he said lowly, having just seen Thasos in the corner. "What an Espion is doing with one of the Queen's guard? Who is that?"

"You don't know Captain Thasos Walkelin? There are two reasons I am working with him. First, we're kin." Not strictly speaking, but in an Atabyrion sense they were all kin.

Ethen's eyes widened. "The captain of the Queen's guard...!?"

"The second – I enjoy his company," Jaylin continued, ignoring the look of envy on his face. "As you've just figured out, I've only been working with the Espion for a few days, so I haven't had time to learn the secret language you all hold so dear. If you'd asked Riveyra or Reonna, they could have told you I spent the night here two days ago."

"Then how were we supposed to know? Just trust you, I suppose?"

Jaylin shook his head. "Jevin's letter will vouch for me. You did the right thing, Ethen, by asking him. He brought me here, for Aster's sake! Now, I need you to do me a favor…"

"You *are* daft!"

Jaylin smiled and shrugged. "Send another note to Jevin, but this one for me. Tell him that I'm close. Very close."

The two stared at each other guardedly, but Ethen relented and slowly nodded. "I suppose I can do that. You're the Atabyrion from that abduction case, aren't you?"

Jaylin nodded and turned to leave but paused. He was relieved that Jevin had not betrayed him. Relieved beyond words. Of course, he had spoken a bit harshly to Ethen in front of other Espion in the room. Shaming a man did not make him an ally. "By the way, Ethen. That was a nice way you put me face down in the alley." He smirked. "It hurt for an hour. I'll have to learn that one."

Ethen smiled at the compliment, the first genuine one Jaylin had seen. Murmurings began up in the common room again, for obviously Jaylin had just confirmed Ethen's version of a story.

"I teach Tah-path for the Espion. It works best against drunk dock workers. You're a quick little flint, and it took a while to put you down. I'll be nursing some bruised ribs, so don't feel too bad about what I did to your face."

Jaylin chuckled in spite of himself and let Ethen have the last words. He nodded to the man and joined Thasos and Reonna.

"This is the fairest inn in the Tier, I've been told, Thasos." Jaylin accepted a cup of mead Reonna offered. "I wouldn't mind being stationed here."

"This place is forbidden to the Queen's guardsmen, though. She knows all about the Bright Well. Too many whispers on Espion pillows."

Jaylin laughed and shook his head. "Well, since you're the captain of the guard, I'm sure the same rules don't apply to you. Jevin may not like you staying here, but I don't think he'll fuss over it too much."

"Are you serious? Of course the Espion would like me to stay, and slip something about how the Queen is secretly planning to assassinate the Mark of Morvenn before her daughter has to marry the fool...oops, I said too much." He grinned and winked at Reonna. "Lass, bring a pitcher of mead with a fistful of myristica dumped in. Now don't be stingy."

Reonna played absently with Jaylin's sleeve. "I will get it straightaway, Captain." She looked worriedly at the younger man. "You only left a few days ago. How did you manage that?" She nodded to his scar.

"He cut himself shaving with a tavern dagger," Thasos answered seriously, stroking his beard.

Jaylin glared at him before gazing up at her. "I earned this from someone who's going to repent it very much." He squeezed her hand. "I think it improves my looks, actually." He tilted his face arrogantly. "What do you think?"

"Most definitely," Reonna replied slyly, giving him a warm, inviting stare. "And so does your hair. Very fetching. No offense, Captain. Let me get that pitcher. For you both."

Food and drink were set before them and they tore into it ravenously. Jaylin's hunger pangs split his side, but tasting the honeyed wafers, salted melon slices, and roast pork eased it. Sloshing a cupful of mead, he glanced at Thasos' plate. His appetite was even greater. The music and gentle hum of the Bright Well drowned out their conversation.

Seeing Jaylin look at him, Thasos took a sip from his mug and set the cup down. "Quit watching me eat."

Reonna scooted next to Jaylin and picked something from his hair. "So, tell me what you did to offend Spanyer so much."

Jaylin raised his eyebrow. "Who? You mean Ethen?"

Reonna nodded. "That's one of his common names. His real name is Roth Spanyer. From what he said, you had words in a back alley."

"More than words," Jaylin added. "He gave me a good taste of the cobblestones."

"He has a great deal of responsibility in the Espion, you know. He controls the Bright Well and the Espion at Dry Dock. He wasn't here the night you and Guyaume Reim came because he was investigating something that happened out at the docks. Some legion sheriff ship caught fire in the bay and burned up the night of Advent. He thought it was suspicious."

"And?" Jaylin asked.

Reonna shrugged. "That's all I know. Spanyer doesn't share his secrets. Not with me anyway. If he put you in a Tah-path hold, then I'm sure you will want a good back rubbing tonight?" She looked at him knowingly.

Thasos shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Quit flirting, I'm trying to eat here."

Jaylin nodded and squeezed her leg under the table before she slipped away. He turned to the captain, waiting for her to retreat to the stairs. "Do you know anything about a burning ship, Thasos? Sounds a little odd to me. Minyan white fire?"

He grunted. "Do you know how many ships catch fire in a year, Jaylin? It's the duty of the Steene, not the Queen. Minor news from the Tiers of Minya and Median usually never make it to court, unless you're Espion. Ships venturing too close to the Island of the Deconeus tend to catch fire. You're probably right about the white fire."

"You're saying it's not Aster's wrath? How unreligious of you," Jaylin said blasphemously.

Thasos smirked. "I pay my devotions when I'm supposed to, lad. Have you seen white fire in action?"

"Never."

"It's an oil that bursts into flame when mixed with water. It's one of this City's many crowns and makes her armada bloody well invincible."

"You think the sheriffs strayed too close to the Tier of Aster?"

Thasos shrugged. "Wouldn't surprise me. There's enough enmity between the Provost and the Deconeus to make a spark out of wet tinder."

They talked and ate until the meal was finished and sat around drinking. Jaylin's muscles felt bruised and sore. "Well, Thasos, there are no private rooms in the Bright Well. I'm sure you can find your way to a bed. I'll get Ethen for it. I promise you."

"Go to bed then, youngling," Thasos teased. "I'm not drunk enough yet. Jevin does store good mead, I'll have to admit. In the morning, I'll start showing you how to handle a highlander. I can't always be near your crib, lad."

By the time Jaylin staggered into the loft after mounting all the stairs, his legs throbbed as well as his shoulders. "Do you have any ointment for your wound?" Reonna asked. He withdrew the small container the healer had given him, and she dabbed it lightly on his cheek.

"Do you think Jevin will let me stay here a few days?"

Starting on his shoulders, Reonna began her secret miracles on his shoulders. "It's not Jevin you need to worry about. If Spanyer doesn't allow it, you won't be given a chance. But I know an inn nearby friendly to the Espion."

"Thank you," Jaylin said, giving her a warm smile. "I have a message coming in the next few days. I'd like you to watch for it in case I can't stay here." The room was dark and quiet and the bed was very comfortable. Drowsiness stole over Jaylin and he was asleep when the errand from Prince Jevin arrived.

* * *

Jaylin awoke at the sound of boots stamping up the staircase. His heart skipped into his mouth and his pulse raced. The memory of his arrest by Alvaron's men was still too fresh in his mind. He tensed, ready to spring out the window if necessary. "It's all right," Reonna whispered next to him. She smoothed the hair from his forehead. "I heard voices down below. I think it's Jevin's errand."

Jaylin rose up on his elbow and watched as Loren Broan cleared the last steps with a lantern. The young errand stopped when he saw them together on the bed and his face flushed. "I – I'm so sorry...I'm sorry, please, I'll wait downstairs," he stammered, retreating back down the steps.

Jaylin's heart still trembled from being awakened so suddenly, but he asked in a confident voice, "Care to join me, Reonna? In case Spanyer decides to torture me again?" Brushing his fingers through his short hair, he sighed and smiled at her. They followed Loren down the steep steps.

Arriving in the lounge well after the Curfew bells, Jaylin noticed the room was still full. Thasos still sat at the table with an empty bottle next to him and appeared to be fighting off sleep. He perked up when he saw Jaylin and gave a subtle nod.

Jaylin smiled, trying to hold down the fear and panic he felt writhing inside. What if the Prince didn't claim to know him? How would he meet with Lady Minya then? The Prince's errand retreated into the shadows. His uniform and hair were unkempt as if he had run the entire way from Premye. Jaylin saw Ethen looking at him, his eyes smoldering. Not a good sign, Jaylin thought gravely.

"Read it," Ethen ordered, his gray-blue eyes menacing. He held out a small folded parchment bearing the remains of Jevin's seal.

It read in a few terse lines:

FROM THE PRINCE, GREETINGS.

BE IT KNOWN THROUGH THE CITY OF MINYA THAT JAYLIN WARNOCK IS UNDER THE PROTECTION OF THE KING'S WILL. YOU WILL GIVE HIM ANY SUPPORT HE REQUESTS, DISPATCH ANY EXPENSES HE INCURS TO MY ATTENTION.

SIGNED, Jevin Tousann
[SEAL AFFIXED]

Jaylin stared at the note with relief and then shrugged nonchalantly at Ethen. "I told you."

Ethen glared at Jaylin before turning to the others assembled in the common room. "Be it so, according to the Prince's wishes. Let no one here hinder this man." He nodded toward the other Espion gathered. "Understand that Wess, Riveryra? Corondin? No following him or taking leads from him."

There was a murmur of assent from the other men, and Jaylin nodded to them respectfully.

Loren motioned for Jaylin to approach and then showed him another message, one with his name written above Jevin's unbroken seal.

"This one was meant for you, in case I found you down here. I hurried as quickly as I could."

Jaylin broke the seal and opened it.

JAYLIN,

AN INVESTIGATION HAS BEGUN CONCERNING THE FALSE IMPRISONMENT OF TWO OF THE MARK OF ALVARON'S SENTRIES, AND THE DEATH OF ONE OF THEM. I AM CERTAIN YOU ARE INVOLVED AND I EXPECT A FULL REPORT WHEN YOUR ASSIGNMENT IS COMPLETED. BE WARNED THOUGH, THAT THE MARK KNOWS OF YOU AND IS SEEKING YOU OUT. HE WILL DESTROY ANY EVIDENCE AND CHANCE THAT YOU MAY TESTIFY AGAINST HIM. WATCH YOURSELF. I AM WITH YOU. THIS ERRAND IS AT YOUR COMMAND.

Jevin

After scanning the message, Jaylin's confidence flamed even higher. The Prince still supported him. He remembered what Jorganon had done, and his anger swelled. *You made a fool's mistake, Alvaron,* he swore to himself. *May I live to see your fall.* He tucked the missive into his pocket. "Listen Loren, I need you to deliver a message back to Prince Jevin. Do you have some parchment?"

"No, I don't," he apologized. "But I can remember what you say to me."

"The Bright Well has plenty," Reonna assured him. "I will get some ink and a stylus."

While Reonna went to fetch it, Jaylin sat down with Thasos and told him about the messages. The captain listened and then swore. "By the Veil, Jorganon's getting himself in even deeper," he snarled. "The man has rice for brains and a tear in the bag. I should be in Premye dealing with *him*."

"I agree he has rice for brains, but it doesn't excuse him." Jaylin held Jevin's personal letter over the lamp flame and watched it shrivel and burn. "We still have work to do down here, Thasos. I'm going to draft a letter to Jevin explaining what happened. I want you to sign it, as Captain of the Queen's Guard. I think that will increase the scrutiny over his actions."

Thasos thought a moment, and then shrugged. "I can attest to what I witnessed, no more. Remember that I serve the Queen, not Prince Jevin. But since you may be killed because of this, I'll sign a note for you. If you think Jevin will care."

"That's irrelevant. You were there – he wasn't. I did not kill the sentry, you did. I'd like to do this because I don't want my troubles coming to you. I'm sure the Queen would defend your actions, but having Jevin defend you as well wouldn't hurt."

Reonna returned with the implements. Jaylin sharpened the bone stylus and then dipped it in the ink and began crafting a note to Jevin. He explained his search of Kalisha's apartment and his subsequent arrest by the Mark of Alvaron, who accused the Prince of plotting her abduction. He included that he was beaten by the Mark and his sentries, then dragged to the sewers and branded by the legion sheriffs. He described Thasos' rescue and how Mark's sentries defied of the Queen's captain. The note keenly expressed his desire to see Alvaron punished for his crimes. He signed it and marked it for Jevin. Thasos then read it over and nodded, imprinting his signet ring in a dab of hot wax next to his name.

Jaylin had no signet ring to seal the note with, but he folded it carefully and handed it to Loren Broan. "Make sure either Jevin or Guyaume Reim get this. You can leave now or early tomorrow."

"Give me a few hours to sleep and I'll be gone," Loren said.

"Thank you. Good to see you again." He gripped the younger man's arm and gave him a grateful smile.

The errand grinned, embarrassed. "See you back in the Tier of Premye."

Jaylin turned to Thasos. "You'd better get some sleep. That cask of mead will go to your head."

"Oh, it's there already." He worked circles into his temples. "See you in the morning."

Jaylin patted Reonna's arm. "Wait for me upstairs, I'll be right there."

She yawned and smiled and slipped out of the common room.

Jaylin approached Ethen who looked up and glared at him.

"You again?"

"Now why are you so upset?" Jaylin demanded. He already suspected Ethen was struggling with envy. Had he ever received a note from Prince Jevin like that? Probably not.

"I don't think you would understand," he replied acidly, then softened a little. "What do you want?"

"Oh, don't assume so quickly, Ethen. I don't want to be your enemy. To be honest, I wanted to speak with you, if it's not too much bother."

"Why?"

"I'd rather talk in the morning, Ethen. It's late. I'm tired. You're still sulking." He gave him a disarming smile. "You seem to know this Tier pretty well. I'd like to ask your advice."

That got Ethen's attention. "In the morning, then. If you're up early enough."

"That's right. You might have to unload some crates of grapes from the docks." He winked at him. "You're more than a dockworker. I'm more than an Atabyrion. In the morning, then."

He nodded once to Ethen and then followed Reonna up the stairs.

CHAPTER TEN
The Bright Well, Tier of Minya

Jaylin awoke in the soiled clothes he'd been wearing for days. *Starting to smell like the City*, he thought with disgust. Sour sweat and street grit clung to his skin and something sooty was caked beneath his fingernails. After washing his face and neck with cold water and soap, he went down to the foyer of the Bright Well. The sun shone between the wood slats covering the windows. Rubbing his eyes, Jaylin approached the keeper of the common room and asked for some fresh bread and melon slices. He found a stool and took it.

Ethen sat at a corner table, watching him, expressionless.

Eating the meal in silence, Jaylin pondered the new day and sipped occasionally from his cup. His tongue still wasn't quite used to the myristica, but at least it was a familiar taste now. He finished the loaf and then grabbed a stuffed wafer and walked over to Ethen's table.

"I've been up for two hours waiting for you."

"Don't tell me waking before the crows is an Espion virtue. I heard street carts banging down the road hours ago. Awful wretches, all of you." It brought a weak smile from Ethen. Jaylin arched his eyebrows. "Mind if I join you?"

Ethen motioned for the chair. "Just as long as you don't start yammering again about what it's like being a dockman."

Jaylin grinned. "But it worked, didn't it?"

"You're a complex boy, but a boy still. And an Atabyrion. At least that explains your rudeness. I've been with the Espion for fifteen years, lad. I'm not a sapling."

"Really? You don't look over thirty."

"Thirty-nine," Ethen replied. "I have a young face. It helps to blend."

"Where were you recruited?"

"Off Dry Dock by Guyaume Reim when I *was* a dock worker. I don't have a face that sticks out like yours, but I do have one that is remembered. Every time Guyaume came back from a journey, he'd see me. I'd make it a point to be in a spot where he could. After two years of seeing me, he took me right from the docks to the Bright Well. I've worked for the Prince since."

"I'm impressed, Ethen."

He smiled cynically. "My name is Spanyer, you dolt. Ethen is a working name."

"You made a big first impression. I doubt I'll ever get your name right now. So, you have a lot of experience in the Espion. Frankly, I have very little. I worked for the legion sheriffs in Abyri before I came here. How much do the Espion help each other?"

The Espion folded his arms and leaned back. "We tell each other everything." He was obviously lying.

"Tell me how it *really* is. With the sheriffs, if a youngling comes in and thinks he knows too much, the others let him fop and fumble like a fish on the deck of a cog."

A little chuckle. "You know that game then. And I take it you aren't interested in subtle answers then. I'll be blunt, lad, since you're so fond of it. Guyaume and Jevin have given us a great deal of power, but neither wants us to know the whole. They have sent us to watch each other, to be sure none are lured by another Mark's silver or any other loyalty. It makes us more cautious, less

trusting. You want to get ahead in the Espion? When you make reports, soak all the glory you can from them, for that kind of attention is a rarity." He smiled wryly. "Does that help you understand us better?"

"It does. What do you know about Lady Kalisha's disappearance?" He was hoping for a reaction and he got one. Ethen's eyes narrowed and two wrinkles folded over his brow.

"Nothing," he said. "Is that why you're here?"

With a half-smile creeping on his lips, Jaylin said, "You're not a very good liar. Listen, you have no reason to trust me, and I'm not asking you to. But I could use some help, and I know that you know something. It's about that mess down at the docks, isn't it?"

Ethen didn't drop his gaze, but his jaw muscles clenched with frustration. "Is it true then that Atabyrions have second sight? I thought it was only a rumor."

Jaylin shook his head. "I don't have second sight, but I am quite good at reading faces. Let me offer something first, so you know I'm not trying to take without giving. I am working on Kalisha's disappearance as well. Use that information however you like. I don't much care for games or glory, and I don't like being used for that purpose. I avoid all of that. To me, it's Minyan intrigue, and I think I was chosen into the Espion because I'm not Minyan. I just want to do my job, and I could use some help from you, if you are willing."

Ethen paused and then shook his head. "You're young, but you have a street sense I spent ten years trying to earn. It's really starting to annoy me." Jaylin grinned and listened. "In the Espion, trust is fragile. I've known spies who pretended to be honest but were really back-stabbing knaves trying to get glory from Jevin or Guyaume, or one of the Espion masters in another Tier. If I don't get credit for what I'm about to tell you, you'll never sleep another night in the Bright Well again. Is that clear?"

"Don't get upset, Ethen. I don't need badges or signet rings to feel good about myself. I'm not a cod from Premye like the Mark of Alvaron."

Ethen chuckled at the dock worker's humor. "We'll see. So, the burning ship the eve of Advent? That's what you want to know about? I've been able to link some clues, but I'm biding my time, waiting on a contact to get back with me. Here's what I know so far. Apparently, as the oil boats started off Konen Dam that night, a sheriff's skiff left the Steene. I'm given to understand that it came too close to the Tier of Aster and that the god's finger came down and burned the bloody skiff to ashes. Only one sheriff survived and swam back to the Steene. I've heard that he's horribly burned, but the sheriffs are denying everything and won't let a soul in to see him. Not even Espion."

Jaylin whistled. "Does Jevin know?"

Ethen shook his head. "You're the only other person outside the sheriffs and myself who does."

Jaylin folded his arms and thought a moment. "How did you learn this?"

"I have friends in legion sheriffs too, but no one high enough who can tell me where they are hiding this man or even his name. The Steene says officially that everyone was killed, but my man swears he saw this sheriff pulled from the waters. It's scandalous for the Provost, because the legion sheriffs are not supposed to be anywhere near the Tier of Aster."

"And you feel this is connected in some way to Kalisha?"

Ethen nodded, his eyes deep and intense. "She hasn't been seen since before Advent. No one has seen her after. Maybe it's a coincidence. I'm not sure if you know this, but there is an Espion renegade with connection to the legion sheriffs. And she is not above killing witnesses."

"I've met Lady Minya. That's why I went to the Steene. The sheriff you saw me talking to outside the Cougar? Remember him?"

"Captain Halesowen, mystaquan brigade..."

"Lady Minya's personal escort," Jaylin finished. "You know a lot about her then?"

Ethen shrugged. "I've been Espion for fifteen years. I knew her when she joined."

"Really?" Jaylin asked, leaning forward.

"I survived the Espion purge – one of the few who did. She and Jevin went at each other like two street cats. They both ended up cut and bloody, but she won in the end just by staying alive despite his every effort to have her killed." His gaze had a keen edge. "You remind me a little of her. Some think she has Atabyrion blood."

Jaylin heard heavy boots thump down the steps and Thasos entered the parlor, massaging his temples. Jaylin smiled and waved and said in a voice pitched loud enough to aggravate a headache. "Good morning! How are you feeling, Thasos?"

"Ooogghh!" Thasos moaned, waving his hand and wincing at the noise. "Have you no pity?"

Jaylin turned back to Ethen. His eyes were suspicious again. "Interesting timing. What do you know about the Captain of the Queen's Guard?"

Thasos took a chair in the corner and slumped in it.

Ethen shrugged. "A good swordsman. An Atabyrion like you. Keeps clean of intrigue most of the time, though I've heard he makes husbands jealous. We're always trying to lure the Queen's men into Jevin's service, but his Atabyrion loyalty prevents it." He smiled cynically. "See what you can do with him, though. His reputation isn't beyond reproach, but he's no Minyan either, as you would put it. There's no problem with him being here, but keep in mind that the Espion doesn't trust him. Whatever friendship he holds for a countryman or a kinsman is between the two of you. Just keep in mind that his first priority is and always will be serving Queen Keyana, not our prince."

"Jaylin!" Thasos called out in a wounded voice. "Don't just sit there ignoring my misery! Bring me some drink to cool my head."

Ethen shook his head, disgusted, and started to rise. "I've got to work."

"Thank you," Jaylin said – with as much feeling as he could muster at that hour. "If I stumble into news about what happened at the docks, I'll pass it along to you. But one more thing. What is there about me that reminds you of her?" He raised an eyebrow.

"She was glib, so easy in confidences that you wanted to trust her. But she was the biggest liar of us all. I think I knew before the others, but there wasn't any way to say it, not with her having so much power. When she betrayed the Espion, it poisoned us… almost destroyed us. It won't happen again, lad. If your brutal honesty is a sham, you won't last long."

"Then I look forward to working with you." Jaylin left the table to join Thasos. On the way, he asked the keeper of the common room for some mead, laced with chili oil and crushed peppercorns instead of myristica. The man obliged and presented the tall mug to Jaylin when he had finished concocting it.

"Drink this," Jaylin said, sliding the goblet to Thasos who moaned against his forearm. "It'll make that headache go away, I promise."

Thasos raised his head and dragged the mug closer. He lifted it, and paused as he raised it to his lips. His eyes narrowed and he sniffed. "Chili oil?" He took a big quaff. He sat normal for three seconds and then swore, "Aster's gall! That's hot!" He shook his head and shuddered. "This is an awful way to poison a drink." He took another gulp.

"You remind me of my brother," Jaylin murmured shaking his head.

Thasos coughed and choked. "I can see why Minyans favor myristica. Your swill will never sell." His eyes watered and he wiped them with his sleeve. "Barracks cooking couldn't kill me, yet this stuff just may."

Jaylin smiled and lowered his tone conspiratorially. "It appears that the Espion would love to get you into their pockets."

"Of course they would. They've propositioned me repeatedly to become one of their weapons masters. Twice by Jevin himself with a very tempting offer. I feel rather like a damsel being coaxed into bed." He grinned and then winced and rubbed his throbbing temples.

"But the queen holds your loyalty?"

"She is much fairer to look on than the prince after all."

"Well, at least they don't disapprove of us seeing each other. But what would our parents say?"

Thasos shrugged. His grin showed he enjoyed the bantering. "My father, were he still alive, would say it was about time I found a good-looking Atabyrion girl. A little blush and I'd hardly notice the scar."

Jaylin laughed. "Speaking of weapons training, you said you'd show me to handle a highlander today. If you have time between cups."

Thasos set the mug down and looked pensive. He unslung his double-edged sword and laid it on the table. Jaylin slipped the blade out of the scabbard. "You ever handled this weapon back in Abyri?" The lamplight glimmered on the blood-stained blade.

"Yes. Only against trees, though."

"An Atabyrion highlander can cleave a man's head open in one blow. Takes some muscle to swing, yet the steel is very strong, won't snap like Minyan sabers. Guardsmen get a special dispensation from the Sovereign to wear them without a mercy knot. This," he continued, drawing the long pointed dagger from the folds of his tunic belt, "is for situations where you don't have enough time to draw the highlander. It is also illegal to carry in Minya unless you're a sentry or a guardsman. Or an Espion."

"Your queen won't mind you teaching me?"

He grinned. "Actually, she will. But she has a tremendous sense of irony. I did send her a message so she knows I am still alive. But her reply came quickly. She's anxious for me to be back. I can't dally in this Tier for much longer, lad. The King's Will meets in five days. I'll need to be back in Premye before then."

"That's right," Jaylin said, snapping his fingers. "I'd forgotten about that. There isn't much time then. How long would it take to get to the Steene and back?"

"Day and a half. We wouldn't make it back tonight unless we could fly. You miss the keep already?"

"No, I'm just wondering if Carshalton knows something about the skiff that caught fire. How close is the Tier of Aster?"

"Get serious."

"I am. How far is it?"

"Farther than the Steene. Not even I have safe conduct in there. The rioters in that Tier hate all Premyens except the exiled kind. Radamistus is…kind of hard to describe. Somber…and cunning as a pike. Stay away from Aster, Jaylin. You wouldn't last a day before the Deconeus' men found out about you. And I've heard they behead Espion at midnight and don't return the bodies."

"Or maybe it's sanctuary or the axe? Very well. Then we stay at the Bright Well and you train me and hope the message I'm waiting for arrives in the next day or two. Seems a fair trade to me. I was beginning to think you were just getting a free pull off the mules." Jaylin nudged him with his elbow. "That or spying on me is easier when we are together."

Thasos laughed. "You can always cut the hitch ropes when you start getting bored, Jaylin. But I know the City better than you do, and if you're considering facing Lady Minya alone, you might as

well stand in a ditch during a flood. I'll be there to guard your flanks if need be. Waiting is onerous, but there are worse tortures."

Jaylin noticed the beads of sweat rolling down Thasos' cheeks. "Do you need anything to eat?" he asked innocently.

Thasos shook his head. "No. I think I'm going to retch all over your boots. That drink you gave me is working…fast."

* * *

"Keep the blade up," Thasos said, grabbing Jaylin's wrist and bringing the hilt in line. The afternoon had passed too quickly, and both of them sweated with the exertion in the rear alley behind the Bright Well. "A highlander is much heavier than a saber, so let its weight work with you. Now again – block up, block down, parry right and left. Go!" The blades clashed and Jaylin felt himself move more fluidly with the heavy weapon.

"Excellent!" Thasos congratulated. "You can work on that drill for weeks, building your arm and shoulders up. Tiring, isn't it?"

Jaylin nodded, mopping his face with his sleeve. "You dropped Alvaron's sentries quickly enough…made it look too easy."

Thasos shrugged and smiled. He nodded to the window by the rear door of the Bright Well. "The wench is coming. Now, if you stop for a bath and a rub again this early in the day, I'm going to..."

The rear door of the inn opened and Reonna beckoned quickly. "Jaylin!"

Jaylin handed the highlander back to Thasos. The captain looked surprised. "You only saw Halesowen yesterday."

"Unless it's a letter from Jevin. Come on."

Reonna held the door for them and they followed her down the hall. "He came in without a word and showed a folded parchment to Riveyra. It had your name on it, so I came to fetch you."

"Did he leave?" Jaylin asked, quickening his pace.

"No, he's still in the common room."

When Jaylin entered the parlor, the first thing he noticed was the little boy. He looked to be about nine, maybe younger. Brown hair fell down to his shoulders, and he picked at a piece of roast capon with grubby little fingers. There was food smeared over his mouth. He looked at Jaylin as he entered and then wiped his fingers on his threadbare tunic front. Hopping from the stool, he approached Jaylin, fishing a crumpled and oily piece of parchment from his shirt pocket. He wore little green tights with holes in the knees and a ruffled doublet and filthy collar. He handed the note to Jaylin who took it self-consciously. Had the boy recognized him, or assumed? The boy's stare was penetrating, but once he had given the parchment, he climbed up on the stool and started harassing the chicken bones again.

"Who is he?" Jaylin whispered to Reonna.

"I don't know. He's a cute little urchin, but he hasn't said a word. We asked if he was hungry, but he didn't answer. Almost like he didn't understand. We knew he wanted something when he started staring at that plate."

Jaylin flipped the parchment over. It bore his name and a seal. The symbol was a circle with what looked like sculpted wings -- maybe it was a sunrise or a sunset. He tore it open and knew, instinctively, that it was from Lady Minya. What he read made his stomach fold.

YOU DESIRE TO SEE ME
YES
YOU CAN VIEW MY WILL AT
JAY-SHARP AND SUTTON
TIER OF LUNIS
AT MIDHALLOW
TWO DAYS HENCE

ALONE.

Jaylin blinked. He didn't know anything about the Tier of Lunis, but he knew the term Midhallow. It was the word Atabyrions used to denote midnight, the time when the spirits of evil dominated the land of men and the auspices of sleep protected people from them. Minyans called it midnight. Midhallow was the center of night, the conjunction of the moon and certain stars, denoting a time when darkness reigned. The form of the note also disturbed him, for it was written in an Atabyrion corale.

Jaylin showed the note to Thasos, who raised his eyebrows in concern when he read it. His voice fell to a whisper. "By the Veil, do you think she's…?"

"An Atabyrion? Or maybe she just wants me to feel welcome." He was intrigued beyond words. She had accepted his invitation, and more quickly than he had expected. Perhaps she was still in the Tier of Minya. "Tell me more about the Tier of Lunis."

"It's on the other side of the Semn – where the students live. The University of Crucian is a wonderful place. Full of students trying to start riots and sheriffs seeking to smother them. There are only two ways to cross the Semn, though. The first is Runner's Bridge through the Tier of Aster and then cut north into Lunis. It's the shortest route, but we'll have to check weapons at the gates of Aster so that doesn't work for me. The second way is Southbridge. It connects Median and Lunis. Since it is farther north than Runner's Bridge, it takes longer to get there. But it's not as crowded as Runner's Bridge."

"What about the sheriffs? Any problems with them?"

"Curfew is enforced later there than it is in the Tier of Median. Also, the sewers are only used for urine and hock. What they were intended for. They believe in reforming criminals, not humiliating them. It will take us at least two days to get there. She gave us either a merchant's warehouse or a street junction. I don't know where it is, but we can ask the sheriffs at the gate."

Jaylin frowned. "I thought it was closer than that."

Thasos shook his head. "If we leave tonight, we can get to Sutton's place early and..."

"No," Jaylin interrupted. "I'm going in alone."

"Don't be a fool."

"I'm going in alone," Jaylin repeated. "There's too much at risk, Thasos. If the Espion saw us together, then so did her kind. You saw what she wrote. She must know that I'm with you. Now, if we can find an inn nearby, you can stay there. I want you to be close, but I'm willing to play by her rules as long as she plays fair."

"Do you hear yourself?" His voice rose angrily. "You only talked to Halesowen yesterday before sunset. She has to be on this side of the Semn in order to get the message and respond so quickly. She picked Lunis to draw us away from her movements here. She knows she can race us there and claim the advantage."

"That doesn't matter, Thasos. I offered to meet with her. She accepted and stated the time and location. If I'm going to expect her to show, I need to follow her rules."

"And just what do you know of Minyan rules, lad?"

"I don't want to argue with you," Jaylin said, his anger flashing awake. "Frankly, I need a bath and a shave right now. I do want you to go with me, but she won't trust me if you go to the meeting."

Thasos stood still and smoldered.

"Thasos," Jaylin sighed. "I agree with you – with what you've said about her. It's true that she wants to divert us from her movements here and lure us somewhere else. However, the fact is that if I want to speak with her, it has to be done on her terms."

"Her terms? What if her terms include a visit to the sewers? I'm a good soldier, Jaylin, but I'm not Aster. I can't help you if I'm not there."

"Meeting her is a risk, but it's one that I'm willing to take. You, however, need to watch yourself. She may decide to make a move against you, especially if I am walking into a trap. I'm more concerned about what she'll do to you than what she may do to me."

"You're not my wet nurse. If you are walking into a trap…"

"If that's the case, then I will need you to rescue me, not be taken with me. Besides, Thasos, I'm not as defenseless as I look."

The captain shook his head, his mouth twitching with mirth and frustration. "You forget that the first time I met you, you were face down in a sewer hole." He sighed. "Yes, I think we should be careful, and yes, I'll be close by to help you. If Lady Minya is intending to kill you…" He shrugged. "She'll cross blades with me for it."

* * *

Jaylin awoke before dawn and met Thasos down in the tavern room of the Bright Well. The salt bath the night before had left him feeling relaxed and clean. Reonna had provided new clothes as well. Wordlessly, they nodded to each other and left the Espion inn together. The streets were dark and deserted. A few merchants wrestled carts of melons, squashes, or loaves toward the busy street corners, and the wheels thumped and ticked across the cobblestone tiles. As they walked, the sun rose over the Tier of Minya and the streets became clogged and cluttered with people, carts, and packhorses. Jaylin was getting used to the sights and smells, seeing slovenly men and women forage in gutters for unnoticed brass pins, hearing the moans from the sewer grates.

After they had passed into Median heading north to Southbridge, Thasos stopped at a certain curb grate. He bought some beef pies from a merchant, wrapped them in cloth, and then stuffed it down the grate chute. Jaylin saw the look on his face as he did it – sad and melancholy. When he was through, he smiled his usual grin and nudged them to keep going.

Jaylin was touched by Thasos' gesture, but it was not the time or place to ask him about his experience in the Minyan sewers. They walked briskly and made excellent time, reaching the gates of Southbridge by dusk, before they closed. Thasos brought them to a dilapidated inn on the north side of the street. The whitewash was flaking off and the roof sagged dangerously.

"This place looks like a cockroach hive, and admittedly it is one. But the owner is honest occasionally and the bug bites don't hurt that bad. They only itch."

"Then I'll trust your sense of taste," Jaylin replied blandly and followed him in. The Konen Eye inn teemed with travelers and drunkards, and Thasos had to shout to be heard over the din. There wasn't any room for them, but seeing the captain's badge, the innkeeper obligingly dislodged two tenants who cursed and fumed and stalked out of the inn with threats to call the sheriffs. Thasos and Jaylin found a tiny table they both had difficulty fitting around and ordered trout chowder in trenchers.

"So," Thasos said over the noise. "We should get there tomorrow evening for sure. If we can

find the place. Want me to ask the innkeeper or talk to the sheriffs tomorrow? They're always in a wretched mood before Curfew."

Jaylin thought about Thasos' suggestion and then shrugged. "Might as well ask the innkeeper. Let's not get the sheriffs involved. I don't really trust them – except Carshalton, and he's too far downriver right now to ask. How difficult could Jay-Sharp and Sutton be to find?"

"True," Thasos replied. He gazed at the innkeeper and then motioned for him to come over. The man did, wringing his hands, and said with a worried voice, "Yes, my good captain? The chowder is on the way, I promise. The cooks are serving it right up, I told them to."

"Anything unusual in Southbridge lately? Are you finally recovering from the Advent celebration?"

The innkeeper thought a moment then beamed. "Much excitement, actually. Earlier this week, a group of Curfew officers were practically killed by some ruffian farther down the bridge." He shuddered. "A nasty event, brought a lot of trouble to us when they searched for the culprit. Let's see...oh, we're also hearing rumors that prostitutes are dying in Lunis."

"The stitches?" Thasos queried.

The innkeeper shook his head. "No, murder. But don't you worry, Southbridge is safe, with enough legion sheriffs on each end to keep things peaceful. Well, mostly anyway. And last news, there was a robbery ring discovered at the baker's shop! It turns out that some of the waitresses were stealing rings and things from customers, and then the head cook baked it into some rolls! Imagine that! Well, a customer happened to buy the wrong roll and CRUNCH, found the stolen ring. They were all dragged off to the sewers yesterday morning. It broke the poor man's tooth, too."

Jaylin half-listened to the conversation. He noticed that the serving girls in the tavern were stealing from customers, whispering to others. He kept his hand on his own purse.

"Do you know Lunis very well?" Thasos pressed. "Or someone who does?"

The innkeeper paused. "Are you looking for a person or a place?"

"A place."

He pursed his lips. "Let me fetch someone for you." He waddled through the crowd and approached a serving girl and motioned for her to visit their table. She had dull red hair and a prominent nose. She was bony and thin and a splash of freckles covered her face. Her blue eyes were pale, ice-like, but she had a pleasant smile.

"I'm Dezanne," she greeted. "I grew up in Lunis." she held her tray against her willow-thin body.

Thasos pursed his lips. "I'm looking for Jay-Sharp and Sutton."

She nodded. "Jay-Sharp is an off road in Lunis, probably a day's walk from here. West side of Lunis, before you get to Triple Junction. You know where it is?" Thasos nodded. She paused, thinking. "That side of Lunis is pretty run-down now. Most of the buildings on Jay-Sharp are empty and the buildings are falling apart. Sutton was a lawyer, I think. It's probably empty now."

"So if I take the western road through Lunis, away from the University, I'll come across Jay-Sharp eventually?" Thasos asked.

She nodded. "As you get closer, just ask anyone. Most people know where Jay-Sharp is."

"Thank you, Dezanne," Thasos said and gave her a silver dyx. "We appreciate it." As she left, the captain turned to Jaylin. "Lunis is wide, but the crowds aren't as bad as it is in Median and Minya. I hope it's not too near Triple Junction."

"Where is that?"

"It's the place where three Tiers cross over – Aster, Lunis, and Infidel. It's patrolled by the legion sheriffs and part of the Sovereign's garrison to prevent the gypsies from crossing into Lunis.

It's a lawless part of the City. I'm hoping that Jay-Sharp isn't too close. Anyone from the King's Will shouldn't wander there alone unless they have dark hair and skin like the gypsies do. Anyway, I think we should find a place to stay nearby and go there after Curfew. I'll escort you to the building, to make sure you get there safely, and then remain behind. Do you have any plans on how you're going to greet her? I'm sure a polite kiss would be appropriate."

"Thasos," he sighed, shaking his head. "I do use my mouth, but I tend to talk my way through things first. She did pick an interesting place to meet. Nothing but empty buildings all around – you could hide a lot in a place like that."

"That worries me."

"As for my plan, I intend to ask straight out what I want to know from her."

"Ah, the direct assault. Like a cavalry charge uphill against a fortified wall. I've always preferred a quick death myself."

"Not exactly, Thasos. She's not the kind of person you'd want to toss daggers with. Not without losing anyway. I just want to be sure that you don't get too close. I have a feeling that this whole situation could flash like a summer lightning storm, and I can't afford for you to get caught."

"You can't afford it? I don't think I'd like to get caught in her web either. Not that she isn't fair to look on though." He shook his head. "I don't know, but I have a very bad feeling about this. My battle intuition is screaming that we're walking into an ambush."

Jaylin took a sip from his drink. "So is mine, Thasos. So is mine. But you just have to remember one thing – I can talk my way out of anything."

Thasos' eyebrow arched.

"If Alvaron's men had dumped me in before you got there, I would have found a way out. Have a little confidence, and we'll light a candle for Fate tonight and let the Minyans scream blasphemy."

"Like true Atabyrions on the eve of a bloodletting." Thasos raised his mug. "Well, as our people are so fond of saying…?"

"The moon always rises. As do taxes and the tide."

* * *

Before the Curfew bells rang, two legion sheriffs entered the Konen's Eye and announced that those who did not have places to sleep should get moving and find shelter soon. There was a general uproar of whining and laments, and half the people in the tavern portion left. Folks started settling down on the sticky floor, and Jaylin was grateful they had a room.

The Curfew bells rang about an hour later, and Thasos and Jaylin stayed up talking. The summer night was warm and neither really felt like sleeping. Thasos commented that it hadn't rained in a while and they were probably due for a good drenching. "Just our luck, it will probably drench us tomorrow while we're crossing the Tier." As the tavern started to settle down and snores were heard rising from underneath tables, a group of four legion sheriffs entered the tavern.

The Curfew officers looked menacing, and their commanding gait caused a shock of silence in the tavern. Jaylin studied them. The silver badges and the right to carry weapons added to their arrogance. The bartender looked down and started rubbing glasses with a towel. The serving girls retreated, except the red-head who had served the two Atabyrions earlier.

She approached the sheriffs and asked with a timid voice, "Can I serve you?"

One looked at her in disgust. "Girl, there's nothing you have I could want."

Anger steamed her face and she apologized and retreated. The patrons of the inn skulked and

looked away, not wanting to be seen. The legion sheriffs glanced around the room until they saw their table. Jaylin caught one of them make a subtle head gesture to the others, almost as if directing their attention to the two Atabyrions. An unsettling feeling came over him, and Jaylin glanced at Thasos. His eyes had narrowed.

The sheriffs approached their table. The head sheriff asked Thasos, "You got a room, lass?"

"If you ask me, I think they're sharing a bed," another jeered.

Thasos chuckled and swirled his drink. "That was good. Well-aimed and just insulting enough. You should come to Shallic Palace the next time the Sovereign needs a fool. I'll recommend you." He took a long sip from his mug, but didn't take his eyes off them.

"Look at his sword," one of them whispered.

"Observant too," Thasos said to Jaylin in a complimentary tone. "Perhaps they'll deduce next that I know how to use it."

The peculiarity of the scene stood out to Jaylin. They were being deliberately baited.

"Is this your love then?" one of them demanded, grabbing Jaylin's tunic and jostling him. "He looks a little scrawny. Or do you like them this girlish?"

Jaylin's temper broke before Thasos' did. "Well, my friend, I think our fearless sheriffs here sell out easier than a thief's sworn word." His eyes never left the Curfew officers. "Tell me, kind officers, whose coin is purchasing this entertainment? Are you just trying to provoke us so you can arrest us, or is there some deeper purpose? You should know that interfering with the King's Will brings a penalty of death. And don't think my friend and I couldn't kill you before you could say a quick prayer to Aster." He turned to Thasos. "Or am I out of line?"

Jaylin saw the lead sheriff's face twist with rage and his hand drew back for a punch. It was so obvious and ill-timed that Jaylin easily ducked. He shoved the chair backward and sprayed the sheriff with his half-full mug. Thasos lunged, hitting the first sheriff in the jaw with a loud ominous crack – his jawbone.

"Get him, save the boy!" the head sheriff bellowed and rushed Jaylin, swinging. The other two sheriffs charged Thasos and drove him back into the wall, hammering his ribs. Jaylin ducked and dodged and the sheriff's blows sailed by his face. Cocking back his fist, Jaylin sprung forward and struck him on the chin. But the man was bigger and heavier, and the blow hurt Jaylin's hand and wrist while only mildly dazing the sheriff. Thasos managed to shove his attackers back.

Jaylin twisted away from another blow and then was caught by one in the stomach. The air whooshed from his lungs, but he managed to dodge the next strikes. Planting his hands on the table, Jaylin pushed himself up and kicked the sheriff in the gut. As the man crumpled, Jaylin brought his knee up, cracking the man's nose.

It was over that quickly.

Thasos strolled over to the captain of the legion sheriffs crumpled on the floor and emptied a mug on his face to wake him up. "Who sent you?" he demanded. The captain sputtered and Thasos gripped his throat and squeezed. "No games. Who sent you?"

"The gate captain," he coughed. "Gave us extra duty money to provoke you. See what you could do."

"Do you have that duty money?"

The sheriff nodded miserably.

Thasos let go of his throat and extended his palm. "You'll kindly give it all to us. You lost, after all. Tell that fool gate captain if he ever tries something like that again, I'll order the Queen's guard down here to chasten you all and that I'll run him through myself. Now go tell him, before I order it done!"

Thasos collected a handful of silver dyx and then dropped several coins into Jaylin's hand. They reclaimed their seats as if nothing had happened. "She sent them, I'm willing to bet," Thasos muttered. "I don't like the way this is turning out."

"Think they'll be back?" Jaylin asked in a low tone as the talk started afire in the inn again.

Thasos shook his head. "No, that's why I let them go. They did this for money, not duty. If we'd killed them, then we'd have had problems. My tunic and badge should get us through most nonsense, but this is the Provost's jurisdiction after all."

A tinge of worry spread through Jaylin's stomach. He hated that feeling. "Well, Thasos, I may have underestimated Lady Minya's interest in me."

"There's a thought," Thasos said with a wry quirk. "If she shows interest in anyone you can take it as being dangerous. What I don't understand is why she agreed to this meeting."

"That's what I'm wondering. Jevin told me that the only way to ruin her was for someone to be able to think like her." He whistled lowly and shook his head. "I'm a pretty good judge of character, but right now I can't figure her out. I'll bet though that she's probably wondering the same about me. But why would she take any special interest?"

"You are a handsome lad," Thasos suggested. "Maybe she likes you."

"I'm trying to be serious. She has probably guessed why Jevin brought me here. But I've only been in Minya a few days. Doing something to me now will accomplish nothing."

Thasos shrugged. "Maybe she just wants to squash you before you do become a blister on her heel. Roaches are easier to smash before their shells harden."

Jaylin frowned and considered it. "No, I don't think so, Thasos. She showed she was interested in me. But what good can I do her? I have little knowledge of how the Espion operates and even less of Jevin's private affairs. In fact, she probably knows as much about me as Jevin does."

"Maybe she wants to recruit you?"

"Maybe, but then why would she send those inept sheriffs?"

"Unless she didn't. Maybe Retkonen gave the order to harass the Queen's guard."

"Who's Retkonen?"

"He's the Provost of Minya. Provost Retkonen."

"I'm drowning in names already, Thasos. Just don't make me recite the forty-three Marks of Premye."

"There's less than thirty now, Jaylin. But the Provost is an important name to know. He'll be at the King's Will."

Jaylin rubbed his mouth and thought for several moments. She was an enigma, and it frustrated him. "We may be walking into a trap, but I just can't figure out why she would set one. It makes no sense. Women!" he said with exasperation.

"I'll drink to that truth," Thasos said and grinned.

* * *

Jaylin spent a fitful time in bed, thinking and pondering about his encounter with Lady Minya. He taxed his memory, trying to glean every detail from his first encounter with her at the docks. What motivated her? What compelled her to abandon and defy Jevin? What had she learned, or how had she reacted to the Espion's plans? He wished Ethen were there to question. He had known Lady Minya. But had any of the Espion truly understood her? Jaylin didn't think so. If they had, she'd be dead already. After an hour of restlessness, he surrendered to sleep and calmed himself. He was good at letting go of his problems. Take a few breaths and banish them to the morning, he told himself. He

slept the rest of the night like a child.

Jaylin and Thasos left without breakfast, choosing to eat with street vendors after they'd entered Lunis. They crossed Southbridge and passed through the gates in the Tier of Lunis. Jaylin noticed at once that Lunis was indeed prettier than Median or Minya. The housing and shops had consistent designs, mostly mortar and brick. Tall towers crowded the skyline – tokens of wealth, Thasos pointed out – and buildings and shops congested the city blocks. Lunis was famous for the University of Crucian, and the Tier's masses were mostly comprised of faculty, students, and prostitutes to serve both. There were legion sheriffs everywhere, but they seemed more respectable than the ones in the Tier of Minya. It took asking several vendors for directions before they learned that Jay-Sharp was on the far side of the Tier. It took all day to walk there, and they reached it just before dusk.

Jay-Sharp was a street that bent and curved, very unusual for the orderly Tier. The buildings were all three or four-story warehouses with broken windows and pipes and gutters hanging from the sides like swollen veins. The street cobbles were in desperate need of repair and huge ditches made the footing precarious. It smelled like rotten wood and garbage, and Jaylin was surprised to find that no one was there. Not a soul.

Thasos stopped and folded his arms. "Can't see what's around the bend," he muttered. "And I will bet you a silver dyx that's where Sutton is."

"I think you're right," Jaylin said, feeling nervous. He scanned the buildings, trying to spy any movement, but it was empty.

Thasos looked up at the sky. "Midhallow isn't for a few more hours. You want to go there now and wait for her, or come back after Curfew?"

"Let's come back later," Jaylin said after thinking about it. "There's no point in lingering around an abandoned neighborhood, wondering where the ambush will come from."

"Very well," Thasos sighed. "I think I saw a run-down inn not far from here. We'll return after dark."

* * *

It was nearly Midhallow. The two Atabyrions stepped off the creaking plank onto the cold streets as the church bells rang a single tone. The moon offered barely enough light to walk, and the warm summer air had cooled enough that a cloak felt comfortable. Jaylin couldn't see anything before them and had to wait a moment for his eyes to adjust to the night.

"Reminds me of the Gypsy Wars," Thasos whispered, tugging loose his sword.

Jaylin kept near him. The sound of their boots off the cobble alerted anyone around that they were coming. After reaching Jay-Sharp, Thasos stopped. "I should go with you."

"I want her to know I came alone."

"I know. If you're not back at that inn by morning, I'm coming for you."

They clapped each other on the back, and then Jaylin entered Jay-Sharp alone. He stumbled once in the street, unable to see the ditches in the road. His ankle hurt, but he kept going, careful each time he put his foot down. He reached the bend in the road and veered left. Glancing back, there was no sign of Thasos in the darkness. On each side of the road, the buildings creaked and dripped. Rats scurried along the drain pipes, and the wind moaned through the broken window panes. It reminded him of the root cellar in Abyri where he found the Wumsiah children and the Keeper. He shivered with the memory.

Jaylin saw a light in one of the buildings ahead and knew it was Sutton's place. All the other

warehouses were dark. Nervously, he wiped his sweaty hands on his clothes. He knew he was being watched and didn't want them to think he'd lost his nerve.

The building with the light was two stories high, lopsided and decayed with water damage. The front doorway stood open, and flakes of paint and moldering wood littered the front. Jaylin stopped and gazed inside. A light shone brilliantly in the middle of the building, but he could not see the source. It had given off enough of a glow to see from the street. The place was broken down, ugly and reeking of mildew. Steeling his nerves, he entered. No sounds, no movement, except the rats and the dripping pipes.

Jaylin's boots creaked against the rotten floorboards as he walked in. The place was damp and dripping. It had a fetid, terrible stench. He covered his mouth, trying to breathe normally. Deeper, he found a small hallway leading to a room with a single table on which sat a single lamp with a high flame. He thought he saw someone at the end of the hall, just out of the lamp's light. He hesitated and then stepped forward.

"I'm alone." He showed his empty hands.

"I know," a woman replied.

Jaylin heard noise then, movement. Outside, bodies rushed toward the building. He whirled around and saw several men outside, throwing what looked like glass bottles against the doorframe. As soon as the bottles struck, fire exploded and licked up the wood as if it were dry. It burned a hot angry green. The first wave of heat nearly knocked Jaylin down. The whole building was suddenly afire, from the outside burning in. The flames came through the rafters from above and ate the floorboards beneath. It moved like grass snakes.

Lady Minya approached the table. Beneath it, a trapdoor led below. "Shall we?" she invited before jumping down into the cellar.

There was no going back. The flames would have charred him to ash. Beyond the roar of the fire, he thought he heard someone shouting. He grit his teeth in anger. The blaze raced toward him and Jaylin did the only thing he could.

He followed Lady Minya down the shaft.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Master Finch's Forge, Tier of Aster

Gabe awoke in a stupor, the imprint of the table's woodgrain on his cheek. His head throbbed as did his shoulder, putting him in an irritable mood. He massaged the bruises and let out a long sigh. The legion sheriffs deserved nothing better than Aster's cruelest damnation. They had violated the sanctuary covenant. He hoped that Radamistus would have them punished. Severely. Rising from the table, he parted the curtain and the bright sun stabbed his eyes. It was well into the morning, and he cursed because he had wanted to leave for the Tier of Lunis earlier. Every time he left the boundaries of the Tier of Aster, he grew more and more edgy. The City was so unpredictable. He could wait and go the next day, but he wanted to get the trip over with. He scowled at the empty goblet on the table, regretting it.

After stumbling to the kitchen, Gabe forced a stale crust of bread into his mouth and washed it down with tepid water. He chewed on pear slices. The throbbing in his head subsided a little. He then stuffed a large coil of rope and six torches into a heavy travel sack and set it down by the front door. From his weapons cabinet, he withdrew two daggers and sheaths and fastened them onto his belt around his back. Leaving his executioner's axe, he grabbed a smaller one with a double-edge blade.

Though it was dangerous carrying bladed weapons into Lunis, he was a cautious man. He did not like the thought of going into danger without the reassuring heft of steel. Fitting the axe around his shoulder with a leather harness, he covered the weapon with a dark cloak. From the silver chest near his stove, he scooped a small handful of dyx for emergencies. He planned to stay at only one inn, and he packed enough food that he wouldn't need to waste any money on the thief-merchants of Lunis. Before leaving, Gabe stoked the forge fires with another load of coalstone. He examined the stone walls for cracks or breaks. Nodding with satisfaction, he felt confident that his forge could withstand the temperatures he was going to raise it to.

Locking the forge behind him, he first went to the Temple. The morning air sizzled with summer heat and the gulls screeched, dipping low to swipe fallen crusts. The ocean breezes soothed, but the waves were far below, sharing their cool spray with the rocks instead. Jonas sat in Beggar's Stand, stroking his scraggly beard and composing a new poem.

"Good morning, Jonas."

The poet grinned. "I'm still thinking about last night. What a scene! The most memorable Advent in years. Someone said they could hear the sheriffs screaming this morning. Pity, eh?"

"I'm sure the Nasturtium will make them suffer. I'm going into Lunis for a day or two. I started heating up the forge for a new project, and I'd like you to drop by and tend it for me. Three kegs of mead sound like a fair trade. Spiced if you like. Just tell Brooks at the Cushing that I'll pay for it and you can pick them up when you like."

"I would have done it for two, Gabe, but I can see you're in a generous mood and I won't offend you." Jonas took the key the blacksmith offered him. "Now what about those special kegs of Atabyrion wine you have in your cellar?"

"I have each one marked. I'll give you a sip when I get back, but if I find out you've even licked the spigots, I'll…"

"Gabe, I value my life, don't worry. Even if I find a leaky one, I'll let the rats have it."

"There are no rats in my home. Not a one. I would ask one more favor, Jonas. The next time you see Will Valeri around, ask him to try and find out about the Temple and how it was built. The University has to have something about it."

"Should I tell him why?"

"Do you *know* why?"

"No. But I'll ask him. How long are you going to be gone?"

"Just a few days," Gabe said. "Shovel about twenty pounds of coalstone each day. That would be about six or seven scoops with the flat-head shovel. Cover your face when you open the furnace door, or you'll lose your eyebrows."

Jonas waved him away. "I've done it before, Gabe. You rarely leave the Tier, though. Feel grateful that you can. I'm sure the Marks of Premye have four or five assassins on duty in case I should ever try and leave. It's a shame, really."

Gabe shook his head, chuckling. Jonas loved to exaggerate his own importance. "When I get back, I'd like to hear the poem you've written about Advent last night. Does that cheer you? We'll drink the Atabyrion wine and celebrate our own way."

"Poetry and Atabyrion wine. Now that cheers me. What a sight it was, Gabe. I've already scribbled the first few lines of it. I'm calling it, 'The Eve of Advent.' Sounds mysterious, doesn't it?" He shivered. "It will be a good poem. There is a good chance that I can get an advance from the Temple printer, too." He studied Gabe. "You a little hung over? Your eyes are shot."

Gabe shrugged. "I overslept. I'll see you in a few days."

"Begone, blacksmith. I feel a stroke of inspiration coming. Or maybe it's just breakfast." He stifled a burp on the back of his hand. "Definitely breakfast."

While walking through the tame streets of Aster, Gabe stopped once to buy food for the next day and reached the edge of the Tier of Aster before nightfall. He nodded to the Nasturtium guarding the gate and showed them the silver badge he wore on a necklace. It meant he had taken the Abjuration covenant and could come and go as he pleased. Passing the gate wrought with iron ivy leaves scrollwork, he passed through to the Tier of Lunis. He thought back to Dragan's words. The Cleanstool on Southbridge was on the far side of the Tier of Lunis. It would take a day to reach it, a day to return. A day to find Dragan?

Gabe crossed the busy streets of Lunis near Runner's Bridge and hurried to a familiar side alley. Glancing both ways to make sure he wasn't followed, he went to a grate on the road and lifted it. Squeezing himself inside, he stepped onto the rungs hammered into the stone and then slid the grate back over the hole. Blackness shrouded the drainage tunnel. He climbed down into the deep, hearing the cool moan of the shaft breezes. He dropped to the bottom and landed with a little splash into the storm drain. Reaching into his pack, he withdrew a torch and lit it.

The sewers tunnels of Lunis were large mouths made of grates and deep throats disappearing into blackness. They ran at odd angles beneath all the streets of Lunis, pitched at a slight angle and connecting to large sluice works that emptied into the Semn. Though the tunnels themselves were wide, Gabe had to hunch forward because of his height. Torchlight chased the shadows down on each side. He walked for a hundred paces before reaching the first side-shaft. He took it, and after another hundred paces, he found the first sewer main. It was a large metal wheel that controlled a gate mechanism ahead. He turned it, releasing the lock on the gate, and then ventured ahead. The gate groaned and hung ajar, and he pushed it open and went into a square-shaped tunnel. A little staircase went down about six steps and he found himself in a much larger passageway – an access shaft for fixing the sewers.

Gabe followed the passageway for miles, knowing which direction he should go to reach

Southbridge. He'd spent the last several years studying the sewer system of Lunis, trying to find a way into the Tier of Aster. There were no criminals to contend with like on the other side of the Semn, and occasionally he discovered workers blocking the path, but that was rare. After walking for several hours, when he was tired and certain it was well past sundown, he put out the torch and nestled against the wall, folded his arms, and fell asleep. Without the sun or moon to tell him what time of day it was, he wasn't certain whether he had slept for a few hours or for the whole night.

Gabe knew there were sewer tunnels beneath the Tier of Aster itself, and he had been in them several times to repair a broken gear cog controlling the gates and the floods. The few tunnels between the sewers of Aster and Lunis were locked by huge iron gates or mortared off rather than using release wheels and heavy locks. The gates had a double cage lock that barred the way, and the mechanism was complex – Gabe still hadn't figured it out. He wasn't sure they even opened. If they did, only the Nasturtium knew the secret. That meant the only way into the Tier of Aster was through the gates above. It bothered him that after ten years, he still had not discovered another way. He did not doubt one existed.

Gabe spent several more hours negotiating the tunnels. He went back into the sewers twice to check his progress, for the sewer tunnels at that point of the Tier all led to the Semn. From one of the drainage ports, he was able to look upstream and see Southbridge and knew that he was getting closer and closer to it.

When Gabe finally emerged from the sewer tunnels, he doused his third torch and put it in his pack. He never left clues behind. Thick shadows bunched in the streets, and the stink of cooked fish menaced him. It was dusk again. The timing had worked out well, but he still felt anxious to be back home. Approaching new situations made him nervous. Gabe saw signs leading to Southbridge and knew he'd be able to reach the Cleanstool before the gates were closed at Curfew. But would he be able to find a room? He loathed the thought of spending the night on a sticky bar room floor – he would rather return to the tunnels for sleep. *Best to hurry, then.*

He rounded the towered buildings of Lunis until he met the main street leading east. The gate to Southbridge was still open, about twenty legion sheriffs guarded it, but that was normal before the gates shut. Gabe felt a pinch of animosity seeing the sheriffs, a pent-up rage that lingered after the Eve of Advent, but he needed to get past without them noticing his weapons.

Keeping his eyes on the row of buildings beyond, Gabe approached the gate. Being his size, he was used to wary looks, so he did not expect to pass the sheriffs unnoticed. From his side vision, he saw a few stare at him, but he kept walking and crossed unchallenged. He started across the huge stone bridge, amidst a throng of traffic. Towering over the average cart-wheelers and hawkers around him, he did not have any difficulty seeing the weather-beaten signs. The bridge was wider than a regular road and indistinguishable from the road in the Tier of Lunis. Gabe, or any traveler, could have easily thought they were on land but for the creak of timbers and the rumble the wagon wheels made over thick stone arches.

Over half-way across the span, he spotted the Cleanstool Inn. It took a moment to disentangle himself from the mob. After working his way across the street, he walked in. The Cleanstool was crowded with painters and street scrapers and bucket runners. The drinks smelled cheap and the scent of baking mutton pies didn't stir his appetite.

"Come in sir," a young woman greeted Gabe, making him scowl at her friendliness. "Can I find you a chair? There's always a clean stool to sit on here. Stopping by for a drink? I haven't seen you before – we're sure to have a stool large enough for you."

"Better make it a table for that one!" a red-nosed man jeered, taking another huge gulp of mead. His face was pock-marked. "He could sit on the whole bar!"

Gabe scrutinized him, wondering if it was the Nasturtium Branhe in disguise, decided not, and then glanced about the room. To his surprise, there were no places to settle unnoticed and watch the tide of customers come and go. He turned to the serving girl who had approached him.

"I'd like a place to stay the night," he said, unslinging the pack from his shoulder.

"Sorry," she replied. "All full tonight. Unless you want to sleep on the floor in here, but even that space is going quickly. How about something to drink?"

Gabe scanned the room again, looking for a sign of Dragan, but he didn't see the little man. Disappointment welled up inside him, and he wished he had gotten there sooner. Still, there were a lot of people and it was almost dusk. He imagined there wasn't much space in the inn. Did that mean Branhe had not found room there either?

The girl blinked and raised her eyebrows. "Well?"

Gabe looked down at her. "I'm looking for Rixard. He works here?"

She pursed her lips. "You just missed him." She waved her hand down the bridge toward Median. "He left a little while ago. Only works days, you know. Why? Do you owe him money?"

Gabe shook his head. "Do you know where he lives?"

Her blue eyes twinkled. "I might."

Impatience soured his mouth. The Curfew bells would be ringing soon. If he didn't find Rixard or Dragan, he would have to find a place to spend the night. Glaring at the serving girl, he cocked his head. "Either you do or you don't. Why don't you just tell me how much it will cost to find out?"

Her eyes narrowed. She looked past him out in the street. "It depends on what you need him for."

"Just information," Gabe sighed. "Where is he?"

"A silver dyx." She held out her hand. "What you need him for has got to be worth more than that."

"Four nails for such petty information," Gabe countered. "His home."

"One dyx," she replied, refusing. "I know when I deserve the price. Unless you want to wait until after Curfew?"

Shoving into the purse, he grabbed a single coin and slid it into her palm. Her eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "He has a room at Dorosin Place, other side of the bridge. Though I bet you'll find him in the common room stabbing at a goose with no myristica." When she turned the coin over in her hand, her eyes widened with surprise. She glanced at Gabe again – with a look of surprise and respect. "Oh," she whispered. "No wonder you're in a hurry." Her voice was low, guarded. "We don't get many from Aster up here in the evenings. Better hurry. They'll be ringing the bells soon."

Gabe nodded and left the Cleanstool in a hurry. He joined the flow on the street and walked down the bridge at a fierce pace. The crowds thickened around him, but he shoved his way through, making long strides in the pockets of open ground where he could. The sun sank below the tallest buildings, and Gabe shook his head with frustration. Someone stumbled in front of him, and he dodged to one side, nearly trampling a small cart. He hoped that he could reach Dorosin, leave the message with Rixard, and get off the bridge before the gates closed. It was a long walk back though.

"Watch yourself!" the merchant squawked. "You clumsy oaf!"

Gabe glared at the puny man and kept going.

Dorosin Place was one of the few apartments on Southbridge. Three levels stacked on top of each other. Rats scurried across the gutter drains, their claws ticking against the din of the night. Gabe entered the common room where people begged for a room. Dorosin Place only rented by the month, paid in full. The red-haired landlord said it over and over. Chunks of chalky plaster littered the floor, exposing crumbling brick and mildewed beams. Gabe shook his head. The whole building would

collapse in less than five years. Bulges in the ceiling made him nervous even standing there.

"I need a room, just for one night," a desperate man sobbed to the landlord. "I don't have twelve dyx, but let me stay two nights for three. You'll be turning a profit for just two nights."

The landlord shook his head, rubbing his sides. "I sell for the month, I told you. Twelve dyx for a month. There's plenty of rogues come here each night asking to outstay Curfew or watch the oil boats. Advent is over, go back to Minya!"

"But I need to stay on Southbridge," the man pleaded. "Three is enough. I checked all the inns, both sides. There's no more room!"

No more room on Southbridge? Gabe swore under his breath, more impatient than before.

Searching the common room, Gabe found a mousy-looking man cringing in the shadows, hunched over a plate. He shoveled strips of roast goose into his mouth. It was so hot it sizzled, but the man took harsh slurping bites from it, chewing with his mouth open to vent the steam. The hint of a mustache coated with foam clung to his upper lip in wispy tufts. His eyes were dark and hazel-colored, and he watched the room while he ate.

Gabe approached the table.

The little man's eyes traced Gabe's size. His eye twitched, blinking too fast. "Master Finch?"

Gabe nodded.

"Aster's milk, but that was quick. He said you were big." He fanned his mouth and took deep swallows of his drink.

"If you know Dragan, you must be Rixard."

Rixard shifted a little and nodded. "Yes, I know him. He stops by the Cleanstool every once in a while to leave messages. You need him, huh?"

"I do. Can you set up a meeting for me?"

Rixard shook his head. His eyes blinked like hummingbird wings. "Oh no, I don't know how to contact Dragan. When he stops by, I tell him about everyone looking for him. That's all – he wouldn't dare tell me how to find him."

"Listen, Rixard," Gabe said in a low voice. "You can earn an easy half-silver dyx if you can get me in touch with Dragan tonight."

Rixard's eyes widened with greedy pleasure. "Tonight? Hmm, th..that's pretty quick, b..but I can p..probably do it. Yes, p..probably. But I need the half-silver now."

Gabe shook his head. "After I see Dragan. Where is he?"

"Tonight? Does it have to be tonight? Look, if you'll give me the coin, I can probably bring him here." He pushed the plate away and looked ready to run for the door.

"I'll bet he just left, didn't he?" Gabe muttered, planting his hands on the table so hard it rattled. The plate wobbled, jolting bits of goose and grease. He was certain that Dragan had finished meeting with Rixard within the hour, telling him to expect a large blacksmith. "Which side of the bridge did he go?" The mouse-like man opened his mouth to hedge, but Gabe slammed down again. "Which side! Lunis or Median?"

"You want me to call in the sheriffs?" the landlord bellowed at Gabe. "He's paid me for a room. You haven't. Get your hands off that table or I'll call 'em myself."

Gabe glared at Rixard and cocked his head, waiting for an answer.

"You'd b..better hurry," the mouse-like man babbled, white with fear. "Median gate closes e..earlier.

Rising from the table, Gabe shoved the main door of Dorosin Place hard enough to split one of the hinges and hurried into the street. The landlord shouted and cursed at him to pay the damages, but Gabe broke into a jog toward the gate leading to the Tier of Median. Frustration knotted up his

insides. He had a chance to catch up and follow Dragan back to his employer. Radamistus would want that information. It was ambitious and dangerous following a Keeper. But Gabe felt up to the challenge. If he wasn't too late.

Besides, there would be plenty of places to stay on the other side of the river, and he could always go south and cross at Runner's Bridge the next day. Out in the streets, the crowds thinned, making it easy to run the distance. He didn't see anyone of Dragan's height or build. Was he too late? By the Veil, if only he'd walked faster!

As he approached the gates to the Tier of Median, the legion sheriffs began dragging chains through the locks and hinges.

* * *

"I need to get through," Gabe said, approaching the six legion sheriffs locking the gate. He hated even speaking to them, but there was no other choice. The sun was nearly down, muting the colors and bringing out the twinkling stars above. Sweat dripped down his ribs and cheeks from his exertions.

"We let the last group through," one of the sheriffs said. "You should have bloody come sooner." They clamped the big locks through the chain hoops.

"Please. I need to get through. The Curfew bell hasn't rung yet."

"It will any moment," another sheriff snapped. "Sorry you ran all the way here, but you weren't in time. Better get a place on the floor while there are still any left."

"What's the trouble, Coy?" a Curfew officer said, coming from the gatehouse. Gabe risked a glance and saw the sheriff approach. He was a big man, not quite as large as the headsman. He had scratchy black stubble and an earring. He wore the legion sheriff uniform and the badge of a Curfew officer, though not all the buckles were done up and his truncheon hung low on his hip. He had dark eyes, a thin aquiline nose and tufts of black nose hair flaring from his nostrils.

"It's not shift change yet, Trappe," the gate captain said with a snarl. "Why don't you bring your crew down and we can start early for once."

Stopping at the gate, Gabe clenched his hand on an iron bar, peering into the gloom of Median. A small crowd headed away from the gate. He didn't see Dragan, but the little man could have been any one of them. "By the Veil," he cursed. He was so close.

But he had lingered by the gate too long.

"I said the gates are closed!" a sheriff snarled at him, shoving him away. "Now go find somewhere to stay, or I will open the gates again to toss your arse into the sewers with a brand on your arm!"

"Maybe he already has one," the Curfew officer said. "Did you bother checking him, Coy?"

Fury kindled inside Gabe as he backed away. He did not have any circles on his shoulder. He wasn't worried about that. But carrying illegal bladed weapons within the City proper was certainly worth at least a circle or two.

He knew he should have backed away sooner, not drawn attention to himself by fuming.

"I'll take your advice and find a place to stay," Gabe said, retreating. "I'll come through in the morning." Two more legion sheriffs came out of the gatehouse with street lanterns. Gabe almost swore.

"Not so anxious to cross anymore? I think we should check your shoulder," Coy ordered. He looked at the headsman with scathing eyes. "Now why would you be in such a hurry to leave Southbridge tonight?" He glanced at one of the other legion sheriffs. "Any calls for theft? Burglary?"

"I assure you that I have no circles, and that I have committed no crime on Southbridge. There's no law against wanting to spend the night back at home. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Hold still," a sheriff ordered, grabbing his sleeve. "If you have no marks then…"

Gabe shoved him away. The man tripped backwards and landed hard on the cobblestones. The sheriffs looked at their fallen member, stunned.

"You don't want to do this," Gabe warned. His heart blistered with anger.

"Take him down," Coy said with a cold voice. Eight sets of truncheons came out of their hoops. "Sir, you'd best cooperate with us."

Gabe took a half-step back.

"You frightened hens. I can take him alone," the Curfew officer said. "He's slow. Trust me."

"You are a fool, Trappe. Come on. Take him together. Blind him!"

Light from two shielded lanterns glared into Gabe's eyes. Boots shuffled on the cobblestones as the legion sheriffs rushed him.

If he let them grapple him, they would find his weapons.

That left one alternative.

Reaching behind him, Gabe slid out the twin daggers and crossed them in front. Squeezing his eyes shut, he charged into the midst of the sheriffs, spreading his arms wide to scatter them. Pain exploded as they struck his back and arms with the truncheons, hammering to force him down.

"Knives! He has knives! Call the rest of the watch!" someone shouted.

The iron-tipped heads thudded against his arms and his body. Gabe brought a dagger hilt down on someone's head, spilling him to the ground in a heap. Backhanding another soundly, he heard the man's jawbone crack with the force of the blow. Shouts and yells rose up from the gatehouse, and Gabe let out one of his own. In a fury, he drove the sheriffs back against the gate, punching and kicking them. He caught an attack before it hit his neck and ripped his knife across the sheriffs belly, splitting the chain hauberk and splashing blood. The lights shined on him still, making him a target for anyone with eyes. Planting his foot forward, he threw both daggers at the two sheriffs holding the lanterns. The glass shattered, spraying fire and shards back at them. Yelping in surprise, the sheriffs stamped out the flames.

Before Gabe could move, a truncheon whipped around and struck behind his ear. Pain screamed in his skull and blackness washed over his eyes. He staggered and fell onto the street, trying to rise again. The hard-iron maces hit him twice more, across the old bruise on his shoulder and on the back of his legs, before he regained his senses enough to act. Rage boiled over in his chest and washed away the pain in a hissing steam.

"He's down!" Someone grabbed Gabe's shirt to shove him back on the cobbles.

Like a bear rising, Gabe launched himself at the sheriff. He brought back the truncheon to strike, but the headsman was on top of him before he could land a blow. Staggering backwards, the sheriff tried to ward off the huge man, but he tripped against a body and both went down in a tumble of arms and legs. The sheriff shouted and grunted with pain, trying to free himself, but Gabe was heavier. Gripping the sheriff's shirt, he hoisted him up and punched him full in the face. He lifted his fist again, pounding blow after blow until blood spurted from the sheriff's nose and lips.

Three men grappled Gabe from behind, pulling him off the bleeding Curfew officer. Shrugging his shoulders and hunching forward, Gabe threw two of them off. One of the sheriff's forearms clamped around his throat, trying to choke off his air. Reaching over his head, Gabe grabbed the man's tunic front and hauled him over, slamming the man down on the pavement. The sheriff quivered and convulsed, but didn't rise. From his shoulder strap, Gabe drew his double-bladed axe and squared off with the others.

"Run!" someone shrieked. Several legion sheriffs quavered, gripping their truncheons defensively wondering whether to stay or flee.

"Coy's out! Back to the gatehouse! Get the watch down here! Go! Go!"

"Crossbows! Get the bloody crossbows down here!"

Only three sheriffs were left as the Curfew bells began pealing in the streets of Median.

Gabe watched them run. For a moment, he thought about cutting through the chains locking the gate. But how many sheriffs would arrive before he made it through them? They weren't chains that would snap at a single blow.

A place to hide. Fast.

Turning towards the darkening street of Southbridge, he ran.

* * *

After touching his throbbing skull, Gabe looked at his fingers. Morning light peeked between the wall slats. At least the bleeding had stopped. Wincing, he pressed the base of his skull and felt the bruised, swollen lump. His body ached in dozens of places. Once the rush of the fight had left him, the pain crowded in and kept him from sleeping most of the night. The thump of bootsteps echoed across the floorboards above him and the churn of the Semn whispered below. Gabe crouched low, wedged between thick barrels of pickled squash.

Staying hidden at night had not been a problem. The Curfew officers on both sides of the bridge had flooded the streets and alleys of Southbridge looking for him. But with so many buildings, levels, and people, it was not easy to find someone in the dark. A sheriff had come near his spot only once, and by keeping still, the swath of lantern light had passed over his head in the crowded storeroom. No one had come any closer since.

Daylight brought new challenges. Gabe considered jumping off the bridge, but he knew that in his condition, he'd never survive the swim downriver. Only one in twenty survived a swim where the Semn met the ocean, and Gabe was not a very good swimmer. With the dawn, the gates to Median and Lunis would be wide open. And each side watching for him. He needed to get back to the Tier of Aster. But which way? Runner's Bridge would have been easier to cross, for the Nasturtium guarded one of the gatehouses. On Southbridge, he was left to his own wits to get out.

Bowing his head, Gabe wrestled with his dilemma. He could not stay undetected in Southbridge for much longer. It was only a matter of time before someone wandered into the storeroom and yelled for the sheriffs. Escaping during daylight would be very difficult. They could fasten the gates long before he got there. But if he could make it to the streets of Lunis or Median, he would be safe. There were so many nooks and alleys and places to hide, the legion sheriffs would never find him. But how could he get past a guarded gatehouse that would be watching for him?

Sometimes the best method of disguise was none at all. The legion sheriffs would be looking for someone trying to sneak away. And perhaps overlook a man walking proudly down the center street. With only enough food for another day, he hardly had a choice.

After rising from the cluster of barrels, Gabe strapped the broad axe to his back again and covered it with his cloak and travel sack. He winced with pain and planned for a very long sleep when he returned to the Tier of Aster. Slipping away from the barrels, he then tapped open the loading window and peeked up at the street alley beyond. After listening for several moments, he rose and went out the window.

The morning air smelled like toasting rye and fish, and he inhaled the scents and felt the first stab of hunger. Day-old bread and crumbly goat cheese filled his stomach. He was thirsty for

Atabyrion wine. A whole cask of it. Pausing at the edge of the alley, he peered into the streets of Southbridge.

Three legion sheriffs stood not sixteen paces away, conferring amongst themselves.

"By the Veil, what luck," Gabe growled. It only took one to raise the alarm. He scratched his throat and waited to see if the sheriffs left. They didn't.

After scanning both sides of the street, Gabe stepped into the crowded morning throngs on Southbridge. He resisted the urge to hunch his shoulders and skulk, to detract from his imposing height. If he could make it through the Median gate…

Four more legion sheriffs appeared in the crowd ahead, walking toward him. Looking to the left, he saw two more, searching the crowds. Specks of black floated in the teeming dregs of Southbridge. They were everywhere. The Provost must have doubled the guard.

Gabe shook his head, murmuring to himself. None of the sheriffs had taken interest in him yet. Yet how could he walk three hundred paces without being noticed? His size alone was distinctive. Someone like Dragan could pass unnoticed through a net of sheriffs. But Gabe wondered if he could. Median, he thought prayerfully. Only a few steps toward Median. He hoped he would not have to fight his way off the bridge.

He wished he had never left the Tier of Aster.

As Gabe looked ahead in the crowd at the approaching sheriffs, he saw Branhe standing right in front of them. When the high seer of the Nasturtium had caught his gaze, he strode up to Gabe quickly. His eyes narrowed. "Follow me – and not a word, Master Finch."

Gabe's heart wrenched with relief. He'd nearly forgotten that Radamistus had sent him. Instead of the black robes of the order, Branhe wore dull brown breeches and a light cloak. Gazing over the heads in front, Gabe watched the sheriffs draw closer. The Nasturtium directed him around toward the western gates, back where the sheriffs guarded the entrance to Lunis. It was even further away.

"Where are we...?"

"Not a word!" Branhe seethed. "Just follow."

Gabe felt a cool draft of air on his face, like the gentle kiss of the wind. Branhe walked straight toward another line of legion sheriffs. Apprehension stabbed at Gabe. What was the Nasturtium doing? Getting him arrested?

"Calmly," Branhe murmured to him. "We will make it through. A little trust, headsman. That's all I'm asking."

Branhe and Gabe walked right past them, and no one noticed. The cool breezy feeling made the air around him colder. The warmth from the hot summer sun had vanished, and Gabe felt a little shiver tear through him. It was getting colder still. They walked through the crowd without bumping into anyone. No one stopped or looked at them, and it was eerily quiet when it should have been noisy. Sheriffs lined the streets on both sides, watching the crowd. Large men were stopped and examined before allowed to continue on. No one stopped them, though.

Gabe realized what it was. Branhe was invoking the Way of Deep Isme. He had been a witness to its power on the Eve of Advent when the legion sheriff skiff burned. A thrill went through him, mixed with shivers of cold. He did not understand why the air felt like deep winter, only that the power of it made it so. Some nights, as a headsman, it had been very cold before executing one of the condemned. He wondered if they had been using their powers during the ceremony on those occasions.

When they reached the gatehouse to Lunis, Gabe's teeth chattered. Being a smith, he was used to the blazing breath of a forge, not the icy chill of winter. He folded his arms over his chest, digging

his hands into his armpits for warmth. The legion sheriff sentries ignored them as they passed. Once they had turned down the first alleyway in the Tier of Lunis, the coldness dissolved and the heat of the city overwhelmed him like a dunk in bath water. Gabe gasped the warm gulps of air and bent over, his body shaking.

The high seer looked him over, examining the skin on his hands and face. "You're cold, Master Finch, but you'll survive."

Gabe's teeth still chattered despite the summer heat. "How…how did you find me, Branhe?"

The high seer smirked. "Aster guided me to you. I heard what happened at the eastern gate last night and sensed your handiwork. I have been waiting for you all morning to surface. You caused quite a stir last night. If what I've heard is correct, you took out an entire gate watch of legion sheriffs. Or was it merely vain exaggeration?"

Gabe shrugged. "I did what I had to do."

Branhe nodded. "But I am sure you have seen how much better life is under the shadow of Aster's grace. You are under Radamistus' protection, which is why I saved you. I will wait here to see if Dragan returns from Median. Tell the Deconeus what happened. All of it. He will be interested to know about your exploits. A man who cannot be intimidated by legion sheriffs or the Keepers would be useful to us." He nodded respectfully. "Tell the Deconeus I will return soon."

"I will," Gabe agreed, staring at the Nasturtium in awe. Work for Radamistus as more than his headsman? He'd never truly considered it. "How?" he whispered. "The sheriffs didn't see us. How did we escape?"

He wanted Branhe to give credence to his suspicions.

But Branhe rested his hand on the headsman's shoulder. "All your life you've studied the way of the forge, Master Finch. Perhaps someday you will choose Aster, and I will teach you. But not until then. There are secrets and powers you must first earn."

Gabe nodded. "Thank you again." He started to leave.

"Before you go, Master Finch." Branhe's eyes narrowed. "We owe you our thanks even more for saving the girl on the docks the other night. Your intervention was timely – more so than you'll probably ever know or understand. She's important, Master Finch. It's best you keep her presence in the Tier of Aster a secret."

CHAPTER TWELVE
Temple Grounds, Tier of Aster

The sewers of Lunis greeted Gabe with cold, dark seclusion. The noise of the Tier faded behind an iron grate, and the rounded tunnels offered shelter from the laws and injustices of the City. He folded his arms, digging into himself as he walked, and passed like a whisper's shadow. By nightfall, or what he assumed to be nightfall, his rage had only just begun to subside. He remembered the legion sheriffs at the gatehouse. In the coolness of the tunnels, his thoughts became clearer. Southbridge – a place he intended to forsake for a long time.

Gabe walked all night and exited the sewers in a familiar alley near the gates leading to Aster by mid-afternoon – the slant of the shadows told him that much. He had made very good time, but his feet hurt and his head throbbed from the sewer gasses. Moving through the alley crowded with debris, he joined the main thoroughfare leading to the gates. He showed the Nasturtium the silver pendant marking him as a resident and bypassed the crowds of pilgrims waiting in line. Though he was bone weary, he decided to get the visit with Radamistus over with. In a quick stop by the forge, he retrieved the executioner's robes to grant him access after dark. His eyes itched and burned.

It was after dark when he arrived at the Temple, but the Nasturtium let him through without question. His legs ached, but he walked without grunting, drawn into himself like a giant rope knot. He hated the other Tiers of Minya, hated the scabs and pestilence they produced. The streets of Aster were thick with criminals, but they dared not defy the sanctity of the Tier and jeopardize the protection Radamistus provided. Many had tried to, and many then tasted the steel of Gabe's axe. The rest of the City teemed with riots and hatred. If Radamistus ruled the City, it would be different.

Passing onto the temple grounds, then heading east to the manor house, Gabe caught a blur of movement coming toward him from the steep pillars of the northern portals. He halted and reached for a dagger that was no longer at his side.

"Wait!" A woman's voice.

From the darkened nave of the church, she approached him. "Wait, I must speak with you!"

The woman hurried down the footpath. The breeze blew her black cloak aside, and the starlight glowed from the white nightdress beneath. Her feet were bare but it was a warm night. That he recognized her voice surprised him.

"You are a headsman of Aster?" she asked, gasping. "Are you the man who saved me?"

Gabe watched her approach. Her gait was one of someone sneaking through the night, trying not to be caught. If she was intimidated by his size, her eyes did not show it. The night muted color, and she looked like cool porcelain. He realized that he had never seen her in the sunlight.

The temple grounds were quiet and deserted, except for the two of them. The leaves of the yew trees and lilacs rustled in the wind, adding fragrance to the air. *She shouldn't be out,* Gabe thought, *not after dark*. He did not want to get caught speaking to her, so determined to keep the conversation brief. "Yes, I am. What do you want?"

"I need your help." She glanced back at the Temple again. She didn't look like she would stay long either. "When the sheriffs tried to arrest me, I threw a chest into the water. I'm sure it sunk right away. It must be where I dropped it. Please, it has all my needles and thimbles – all my savings too. I don't have much to pay you to help me, but I am a good seamstress. I'd make you a new cloak, a new

shirt, whatever you want. But I'm not strong enough to get the chest myself."

"Why don't you ask Radamistus to help you?"

"Oh no, I don't dare ask him. He...frightens me. Please, you're strong enough to carry the chest up from the sea. I'll find a way to pay you..."

Gabe held up his hand to quiet her. "I don't have time right now. I must deliver a report to the Deconeus."

"But will you help me?"

"I will consider it," he sighed with impatience, not wanting to feel pressed. "Contact me at my forge tomorrow afternoon to receive your answer. I must go."

"Wait!" she whispered as he started to leave. "I don't even know who you are or where your forge is. I've been lost twice in this huge Tier trying to find you."

Gabe sighed again. "You will find me at Master Finch's Forge in the alley between the easternmost churches. It's right next to the Old Wall. You can ask anyone on Sutter street where it is."

She looked worried. "Thank you so much. I will see you tomorrow then, Master Finch!" She hurried back to the Temple, her bare feet gliding over the stone. Within the cloister, she vanished into the shadows.

Gabe continued his journey to the manor house of Radamistus, bothered by her persistence yet gratified by it as well. The sight of the walls of windows and silver-studded panes made him breathe easier. The fatigue started to fade. He was very wary and distrustful, especially after his experience on Southbridge. And he did not want to jeopardize his relationship with Radamistus in any way.

Approaching the front doors of the manor, he used a silver hammer on the bell hanging outside. After waiting several moments, a Nasturtium answered the door and inspected him with scrutiny in his eyes. It was the Seneschal of Aster. "Yes?"

"I must see the Deconeus."

"Is he expecting you?"

Gabe shook his head. "I bring a message from High Seer Branhe."

"Come in, but wait here on the threshold. If he will see you tonight, you'll be told." His eyes flashed. "Do not wander, though."

Gabe stood in the stone vestibule while the Nasturtium footsteps echoed down the halls. The threshold was cluttered with baggage and chests, creating a huge pyramid. Tall three-legged candle stands lit the room, and commotion stirred within the depths of the manor. Servants came in and out, carrying baggage and folded robes. Gabe eyed the stack with curiosity and gripped his patience on a tight tether as he was kept waiting. It looked like packing material, like clothes and blankets and stores of food.

From a distant corridor, Gabe heard Radamistus' loud voice as he walked toward the front parlor. "Is the barge prepared? Good, see that waters are clear. If the sheriffs even hint at coming near us, they will burn. Agdistis, gather the scrolls from the library with our sanctuary privileges inscribed. They always demand to see them whenever this comes up. You'd think they had no scribes in all of Premye. And Chastin, do away with those sheriffs after we sail. They've made enough excuses to fill a gypsy king's mouth. I don't want the Provost trying to use them as a bargaining piece."

Within moments, the Deconeus arrived, six Nasturtium flanking him. He looked perturbed and his owlish face gazed at Gabe. "Ah, Master Finch," he said, a twisty smile appearing on his mouth. "You have returned from your errand, I see."

"Yes, Deconeus," Gabe replied with a little nod.

"Come for a walk with me then," the Deconeus invited with a husky cough. "We have much

to discuss, I'm certain." He dismissed the Nasturtium and then motioned for Gabe to fall in next to him. As they walked down an unlit corridor, shafts of moonlight came in at slants from the windows, providing minimal light. A chilling feeling crept over Gabe, made gooseflesh bite his arms. Deep Isme or just a cool hall at night? Gabe wasn't sure.

"What did you discover on Southbridge, Master Finch?" Radamistus asked in a whisper-like voice. "Was Dragan there?"

Gabe still remembered the rush of anger, the tense feel of the knives in his hands, the stab of light from the street lanterns. He did not boast of what he'd done – killing men was never something to boast about – but he shared the details he thought the Deconeus would want to know. He particularly mentioned Branhe's aid in getting off Southbridge.

"Is that all?"

Gabe nodded. "It is an accurate account, Deconeus."

"Remarkable. I am sorry that you experienced so much hardship on your expedition. Southbridge is notorious for its scheming harlots and craven legion sheriffs. They mock the rights of sanctuary here in Aster, yet they deny freedom and provoke the innocent. And it is a godless place, too, for there were no churches to run to for shelter." He shook his head and sighed. "I do wish I knew who Dragan works for. I will pay well for that information, Master Finch. For now, return to your home and rest your feet. You did well. I am leaving tomorrow for Premye to attend the King's Will. If you need to contact me, tell one of the Nasturtium at the gates to have a note delivered to me at the king's palace. Or give a message to my Seneschal. May Aster go with you." He stopped and offered a three-finger benediction on the headsman.

Gabe left Radamistus and the dark hall. The night air cooled and felt refreshing, but exhaustion was starting to eat at him. His head swam with dizziness. Foamy sea water crashed against the cliffs of the Isle. While passing in front of the temple, Gabe glanced out of the corner of his eye for a sign of the woman. He saw no one.

* * *

In the morning, Gabe emerged from his sleeping chamber and drank a cupful of mead to ease his blistering headache. He checked the bursting forge fires and nodded with satisfaction. Any hotter and he knew the forge would devour everything, even the throbbing red kiln-stones that contained it. He had enough ingots in his stores and so decided to begin work later that afternoon. After spending a few moments examining the water-wheel bellows, he nodded with satisfaction.

Gabe emerged from the furnace room dripping with sweat and had to put on a clean shirt. He scrubbed his face with a towel he'd left soaking in a dish of water and then started back to the Temple. It was only mid-morning, and his legs felt fresh again. He arrived at the Temple and found Jonas hunched over, furiously scribing with an ivory stylus. Ink blotches stained his fingers. His beard was unkempt and full of crumbs as he looked up.

The poet grinned. "Good morning, Gabe! You returned last night? By the Veil, and I hadn't drunk all your Atabyrion wine yet yet. I got two of them down yesterday and have not stopped pissing since…"

"You better not have touched any of it," Gabe said in a threatening tone, but it was all in jest.

"I finished the poem yesterday – just making a few last touches. The Temple printer is working on the blocks right now. The first sheets are running tonight."

Gabe nodded and lowered himself into a sitting position on the steps. "Let me see it…"

"No, I must read it to you. There you are, sit comfortably. My words will dazzle you as they've

dazzled the four audiences I had earlier this morning. It's called 'The Eve of Advent', remember? I still like the title."

Jonas quoted it, slowly and dramatically, and Gabe listened with amusement. Jonas was very good, but this was not his best piece. He finished it with a flourish and Gabe clapped.

"Speaking of lovely maidens and carnal thoughts," Jonas said, his voice quieting a little. "There's the girl now. My Eve. Ahh, she's worth a poem, isn't she? I wonder what her true name is?"

Gabe turned around and saw her as she walked from the Temple grounds to the benches along the southern face of the island. She wore a beautiful gown, a patterned green fabric with a silver-threaded design on the bodice and cuffs. It was bunched around her waist but flowed so long it nearly dragged on the paving stones. Her gait was languid, dejected, and the wind whipped her gold-brown hair behind her. In the sunlight, her hair looked almost white, but he could see that it was a light honey-brown color.

"Her?" Having only seen her at night, the darkness had muted the brilliance. He swallowed hard and stared. *Aster's stars, she's beautiful!*

"What do you mean *her*? Is that all you can say? Of course it's *her*!" Jonas snapped, "The king's own daughter is fair, I've heard, but you saved the loveliest wench currently breathing in the Tier of Aster. Rumors have it that she's a Mark's daughter, but I know them all – she isn't one of them. Poor Will Valeri has been mooning like a lovesick spaniel since he's been back. Hasn't had the courage to approach her yet, but he's working on it. Her – yes, that's *her*!" He chewed on the stylus and scratched his beard. "I wonder if she likes older men?"

The woman walked to a bench near the cliff edge and sat down, staring out at the sea. She sat very still, except for her whipping hair. Her shoulders sagged a little. Gabe watched her, unable to look away. "She asked me to help her," Gabe said.

"She...what?" Jonas asked, leaning forward. "She asked for your help? When? You've been gone in Lunis for two bloody days! What do you mean she asked for your help?"

"Last night, Jonas. I doubt you'd remember, but she dropped a chest in the sea when the legion sheriff's skiff rammed hers. She said it had all her sewing supplies, and that I'd be strong enough to fetch it."

"A seamstress…ahhh! Nope, I still don't know who she is. And you told her you'd help her, of course? You didn't!? Gabe Finch, you are mad!"

Gabe bristled. "What about Radamistus? Wouldn't it seem a little odd if I took a swim off the pier? Just setting cages for crabs, Deconeus. Nothing to get excited about."

"Radamistus is leaving for Shallic Palace today. Once he's gone, the Nasturtium won't countermand you. As if they'd dare and not after all you've done! You stand high in the Deconeus' favor right now. Even the Nasturtium are starting to nod politely to me instead of their usual sneers."

"I don't know..." Gabe muttered, still staring at her.

"Know what? What's there to know? Go up and tell her you'll do it. Go on, man!"

"No, I told her to seek my out at my forge later today. She'll come unless she's found another to help solve her problems. I'm not sure I want to get involved."

"You should have thought about that before clubbing the sheriffs on the pier the night of Advent."

Gabe shook his head. "You said Will was back. Did he find the information I asked for about the Temple?"

"He said he would check into it more. I'm expecting him back today, actually. I tell you, the boy just needs to swear the Abjuration covenant and live here like you do. Neither of you have a Mark's ransom on your head." He sighed. "I can never leave."

Gabe risked another peek at her. Somehow, her beauty only added to his suspicion. He had not decided whether he even wanted to help her. The forge always made his thoughts clearer, so he postponed making the decision until he had hammer in hand and was hard at work. The forging process was great for solutions. "Jonas, why don't you come by my place this evening and we'll have that drink I promised you. In fact, bring Will along if you find him. He can stay the night at my place."

"This is new," Jonas said, purring. "Normally we all meet here, but your place is fine. It's ghastly hot though!" He scrubbed his graying beard. "Singes my whiskers every time I go in there."

"Tell Will if he comes, I will introduce him to that lovely damsel over there."

"You shouldn't have told me that. Now he'll start digging me for answers. Is she coming too then?"

"Just tell Will what I said. Thanks for taking care of the forge for me." The poet gave him a hearty pat on the shoulder and Gabe rose and went a different way, hoping she wouldn't see him. He slipped through the north portal doors and made it back to the forge. He was anxious to get working on the crossbow parts. Rixard would have told Dragan about his visit on Southbridge, and he knew he could expect a visit from him in the upcoming days. A Keeper wanted a special crossbow. Who did he intend to kill with it?

Starting in the early afternoon, he began hammering, shaping, and filing enough parts to make three complete crossbows in case any broke during the testing. While the forge was at its peak, he hammered out some iron ingots from his stores to make himself another headsman's axe, an even larger, and a wood-splitting axe. It was a successful afternoon, and sweat and soot covered him at the end. Coal smoke clung to his beard and skin and he had burns in dozens of places, but his skin was nearly as weathered as leather. He removed the heavy apron and hung it on a peg over the coalstone pile. He hadn't heard anyone at the door yet and wondered if she had gotten lost again. Then again, his ears still rang from the noise of his hammering.

While he had hammered away at the metal, as it changed colors from light brown to purple to black, he had thought about the woman's offer and how feasible it would be. Really, it would not take more than one visit to the docks, assuming that the current hadn't moved the heavy chest much or that it hadn't sunk too deep into the swirling sands at the bottom of the pier. It would not be as difficult as finding a treasure on a sunken ship in the middle of the sea, would it? He returned from the hot forge and took a long gulp of mead. After washing his face and arms, he sat down at the table, still shirtless and more than a little nervous about her visit.

A firm knock came at the door.

Gabe hadn't heard anyone approach down the street, and he got up and looked out the spyhole. It was her. He grabbed a fresh shirt and swore, seeing the blackened stains on his pants. Fastening the buttons quickly, he went to the door and opened it.

The sunlight blinded him, and he squinted to see her. She was tiny in the huge doorframe, but her head was held high and she met him with a submissive smile. "I found your shop, Master Finch."

"Please come in," he said. There were no flowers, no tablecloths or finery, but she seemed to relax once she entered and removed her cloak. So unlike Dragan, who had shifted and sniffed like a rodent the moment he entered. She carried the same cloak she wore the night she came to the Tier of Aster. Blood still stained the fabric. She also wore the same dress he had seen her in that morning. Her eyes darted around the small front room while she waited for Gabe to offer her one of the two chairs at the kitchen table.

"Please," the headsman offered, pointing to the chair.

She sat with all the elegance of a queen. Her posture was straight, her manners refined, and

she folded up the cloak on her lap. Green eyes stared at him, a startling shade that made him blink. He remembered how bright they were the night they had met. Bits of blue swam amidst the green.

"I like this neighborhood," she said, meeting his gaze and smiling. "It's very peaceful and clean. Almost secluded. I like that."

"It's only quiet when I'm not in my forge. What is your name? I don't work for strangers."

She hesitated. "Call me Alicia. I left my old life behind when I came here, so I'd rather not talk about that. But I'm twenty-three and a seamstress by trade. I was hoping...had hoped to set up a little shop here in the Tier of Aster, but all my money and all my sewing tools were in that chest." She sighed. "I'm living in the Temple because I can't afford to rent a place without that chest. The Deconeus said that refugees can stay at the Temple for forty days and try to find work. I know I could work for a seamstress, but I'd really rather have my own shop. Make my own designs. You understand that, Master Finch, don't you? As one trade to another? I've been doing this work since I was six and did my masterwork when I was eighteen. But please. I need that box."

Gabe glanced up. She bit her lip, waiting for his response. He felt very uncomfortable being with someone as beautiful as her, especially in his home. He normally didn't take work from women. "I'll help you," he said and was rewarded by a thankful smile.

"Oh thank you! Thank you so much. You've done a great deal for me already, Master Finch. I hate to ask more of you, but I'm so grateful you will help me." She wiped her eyes and laughed, visibly relieved. "I do owe you a great debt. To repay a part of it, I would like you to think about what I can make for you. A tunic or cloak, new clothes. Whatever would please you. You'll be my first customer in Aster."

Gabe smiled like a fool, feeling a blush warm his cheeks. "Would...would you like something to drink?"

"Yes," she replied with another dazzling smile. "Whatever you have is fine."

"Mead?"

She nodded. Gabe rose and fetched two cups. He filled them both and then turned to her. "Some like myristica spice. Do you?"

"If you have it, yes." She smiled as Gabe opened a small spice bag and sprinkled the spice on both drinks. It gave off a sweet aroma. He returned to the table. She sipped it and murmured with delight. She seemed very comfortable with him. "Very good, thank you."

Gabe took a sip and fidgeted in the chair.

Alicia set down her cup and gazed at him. "Are you all right?"

He looked at the table and only her gaze occasionally. He was very hot. Too much coalstone, probably. "Most people are afraid to come down this street. I don't understand why you are not."

"That's easy enough to explain, Master Finch. My father and brother were smiths." She smiled and seemed to savor a memory. "I've always felt at home around a forge. When you rescued me on the pier, I smelled the cinders and coalstone on your clothes and knew you were a blacksmith as well as a…a headsman. Do you use wood as well or just coalstone?"

"Coalstone," Gabe replied, taking another long swallow. "It burns hotter and longer."

"Though more expensive."

He nodded. "True. But I do well enough to afford it."

"If you don't think it's prying too much, can I ask you a question?"

He shifted in his seat. "I suppose."

"Why did you come to the Tier of Aster?"

Gabe chuckled and wiped a bead of mead from the rim of his cup. "I came here because it's quiet and I can't stand the crowds of the City. Radamistus allows anyone to live here, not just

criminals."

She blushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't meant to..."

He held up his hand. "You didn't. I'm just answering you. I came by choice."

"Where did you learn how to be a smith? Was your father?"

"I learned the trade from my grandfather." He shrugged, "Don't know my parents. I work by commission for Radamistus as his headsman too, as you know. Pays well, I suppose. I spend most of my time at the forge, though. There are other headsman as well. I'm not the only one."

"You've been gone for several days, haven't you?"

He nodded. "I went to meet a customer. I keep my commissions secret."

"I respect that. So you do leave the Tier periodically?" Gabe nodded and her face brightened. "That's good to know."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Gabe felt his throat tighten, and she nodded with a pleasant smile. "Are you..." he paused and swallowed. Why was his tongue suddenly so heavy? "Are you...married or involved with anyone?" She looked surprised, and Gabe felt a crimson flush rise to his cheeks. He took a hurried gulp of mead and tried to calm his trembling hand.

"No," she said in a small voice. "No, I'm not married. I came to the Tier of Aster because...because of a relationship I was in." Her eyes saddened. "But I'd really rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. It's only been a few days, really." She took another sip and set the cup down. "Why...why did you ask that?"

Gabe's jaw quivered and he tried to smile, but couldn't. "It's not that I'm...no, it's that...you see," he sighed and saw that she listened with great intensity. "Alicia," he was surprised to be able to say her name, "everyone is talking and asking about you already. The few friends that I have will ask me about you when they find out I know you. Do…do you understand?"

"You want…to know what you should tell them?"

He nodded and took another drink, praying the conversation would end soon.

Her smile turned wistful and sad. "If they are your friends and not common scoundrels, you may say that I'd probably be flattered, but I'm grieving for the loss of my husband. It's not true of course, but it should keep the flies away. I came here to escape relationships, and I'd prefer being left alone for now. In fact, I like this street you live on very much. Quiet, secluded, yet close enough and far enough from the Temple. If you know anyone who's looking to sell or rent out a room, I'd be grateful if you'd introduce me. I want to get out of the Temple as soon as I can. There are too many people there. And you're right. I get a lot of looks."

"The temple grounds are especially crowded during the summer. That's when most choose to pay their yearly devotions."

"It's like a festival every day. I don't do well in crowds." She smiled very prettily. "When can you help me, Master Finch? I want to leave the Temple soon."

"Tomorrow morning."

"That would be wonderful. I should probably get back before they shut the gates. Thank you so much, Master Finch. Now, I expect you to think about what I can make for you. I don't leave debts unpaid." She rose from the table as she talked.

"V..very well, Alicia," Gabe stammered and rose. He escorted her to the door, and she took his hand and squeezed it once, offering her thanks again before leaving. He watched her fasten the cloak to her throat and fold her arms as she walked down the cobbled steps.

* * *

Gabe shut the door and let out a huge sigh of relief. She was nice, gentle, pretty, and that made his stomach dance with anxiety. He cleaned up a little, thinking about how he was going to help her. Some stout rope, a deep breath – a dagger just in case.

He heard two sets of boots coming down the street in an unmeasured stride before the sounds of Jonas and Will joking. A knock on the door came a few moments later.

Gabe answered it and greeted his two friends. "We passed someone along the way," Jonas said, giving Will a poke in the ribs.

The young scholar grinned and fumbled around with his words. "All my training in rhetoric fails me now. By the light of the stars, she's a beauty. Hello, Gabe. I know it has been a while, but I have been busy with the errands you gave me…"

"He's been more busy thinking of *her*," Jonas added, putting a nuance on the word that made Gabe chuckle.

"A little, maybe," Will countered, "but don't go writing a poem about it. And how are you doing, Gabe? It's good to see you! I've learned more about Rex-Endin and the Temple grounds than I'd ever care to know. Dreadfully boring stuff, but some of it might amuse you." His dark curly hair fluttered in the breeze.

"This is not the place for stories," Jonas said, rubbing his hands. "Do we get the pleasure of drinking ourselves silly in your dingy hot shack, or can we go to a real hole and make some noise?"

Gabe stepped out, feeling dirty and sweaty. "The Cushing then. But I've had enough fighting for at least a day or two. If either of you get yourselves into trouble," he shook his head menacingly, "you get yourselves out."

Will grinned and Jonas shrugged, "Sounds like you've had an adventure on Southbridge. Tell us all about it when you're ripping drunk."

Gabe shut and locked the door. Will's shoulders dropped. "She's…she's not joining us then?"

Gabe shook his head, twisting the lock bolt. "No, she had to get back to the Temple, Will. But...if you help me out tomorrow morning, you may get to meet her."

His gray eyes brightened. "I'll be there, Gabe. Aster knows I will!"

They went to the Cushing and found a table against the wall. The turtle-shaped tavern was one of the headman's favorites in Aster. It was not a commonly known place, and no one there was stronger than him. The owner, Brooks, nodded as they arrived, and Gabe ordered drinks for his friends. They thanked him for his generosity. Gradually the tavern filled with visitors, a few local thieves returning from the streets of Lunis and Median with enough stolen wares to trade for drinks. Gabe remembered Rixard and scowled. He'd wring that scrawny man's neck once the deal with Dragan was done.

"Why do you need help at the Temple tomorrow?" Will asked. "Does Radamistus need another sacrifice victim?" He said it jokingly.

Gabe took a long drink. "I need you to hold a rope, that's all. I think that's about all I could expect a student to handle. Book learning only gets you so far."

"A rope? Is Radamistus trying a gallows and a noose these days? How thoughtful." Jonas butted in with a wink.

"Actually, I've suggested it..." Gabe paused, and they both looked at him. He smiled and raised the cup to his lips so they knew he was joking.

"Ah, you big rake," Jonas said. "That reminds me, though..." He reached into his shirt and withdrew a folded piece of paper. "That clay letter press is really fast, especially for short poems like this. See, it's the one I read to you this morning. It only took a day to set the clay blocks. They wanted me to have the first copy before they started stamping more. I get a dyx for every twenty they sell.

Not bad pay for sitting on my cloak all day." He stopped. "Hey, that rhymed, I'd better write it down. That poet-oaf Nils will be eating his shoes in stew for sure!"

Will and Gabe laughed and raised their glasses to Jonas' success. After they had been drinking and talking for a while, Gabe turned to the student. "So, did you get the Temple maps I asked for?"

"Oh, that's right. This mead goes straight to my brains, I'm sorry. The Temple builders weren't from the university, but there is a copy of the design there. I believe the original must be inside the Temple archives. But I can't bring the plans down with me. It's too big to steal. I copied a few pages, but I'm not that good with sketch coal and paper, and I'm not sure what it is you wanted me to look for." He opened his student bag and withdrew the folded sheets. Actually, he had a very steady hand, and Gabe recognized the structural shape at once.

"Thanks, Will," he said, taking the notes. He had always wanted to explore the depths of the temple grounds. And before too much longer, Will would cease being a student, and he would lose his only access to the knowledge of the university.

Will leaned forward. His cheeks were a little flushed, and he had a grin that usually came after he'd been drinking a while. "So what about her, Gabe? Who is she? Jonas told me you saved her, you lucky fool. I'd have faced an entire legion sheriff brigade to rescue her."

Gabe smiled self-consciously and sipped some more. He ordered a plate of spiced fowl they could all share. "Her name is Alicia."

"Alicia," Will murmured like a prayer.

"Alicia," Jonas drawled. "She's a queen, Will. But I don't think she's your type. She likes tall burly smiths who can flatten legion sheriffs with his meaty paws!"

"When the sheriffs rammed her ship," Gabe explained, ignoring Jonas, "she dropped a chest into the sea right near the dock. It's actually shallow right there. I'm going after it for her."

"That's why I'm holding the rope?" Will asked. "Of course I'll help, Gabe! I'll tell you, it's loads better than getting drunk at the Stillwater in Lunis and listening to one of Wilt Monnen's speeches." He shook his head. "That man is going to start a riot one of these days. I'm glad I chose to study comic rhetoric instead. Which is how I found the both of you in this Tier." He clinked mugs with them both.

"Comic rhetoric!" Jonas spluttered. "You always said it was poetic rhetoric?"

Will laughed with gusto. "It's how you handle the crowds *after* you've read a poem. By the Veil, Jonas, you're so sensitive to words!"

"Now don't get your hope snagged on a fishhook," Gabe told Will. "Alicia told me this afternoon that she's not ready to meet anyone quite yet. She's just lost someone important to her."

"I knew she was married," Will moaned. "Did she really say that, Gabe? Seriously, I want to know."

"She was serious about not wanting to meet anyone right now. She told me to say that she'd lost her husband, though she confessed she wasn't married. Believe me, now is not the right time. But I promise to keep good contact with her and introduce you to her when the time is right."

He nodded. "Would you do that for me, Gabe? I'd really like to meet her. Is she nice, or is she as heartless as Pygaorra?"

"Who?"

"Sorry, Pygaorra is from an ancient play. She made her lovers so jealous for her affections that they killed each other for her. It is a terrific comedy."

"No, she was very pleasant."

"What do I keep telling you, Will?" Jonas sighed. "Love is for children. What if she is like Pygaorra and stabbed her husband while he slept and stole off with his goods in the night? I know

whores like that here in Aster. In less than a fortnight, she will steal your heart without breaking your ribs. Oohh," he purred, "I like how that sounded! Better write it down."

"You are not exactly the first person I'd go to for advice in love, Jonas," Will replied with a surly tone. "You almost ended up dead because of a jealous husband. Oh, which reminds me, Gabe. I looked up that gibberish during the execution you mentioned."

"What does it mean?"

"Well, apparently that was a big night for astrologers all over the University. It was the perfect intersection of the moon and a major constellation, the Crux, which doesn't happen very often. The last time was around twenty years ago. I heard talk in some circles for several days, people asking if anyone saw a certain star blink. Supposedly, if you cut open a corpse under that mix, you can predict the future. One guy in Lunis did, and was arrested by the legion sheriffs for murder. It was pretty big news."

"The Shrine of Deep Isme," Jonas muttered. "Keep that talk far away from me. I don't want to know about it." He hunched over the table and picked strips from the bird that had arrived. "The stars just tell us one thing. They may be small, but they are a lot bigger than we are."

Gabe thought about what Will had said, but his mind kept wandering back to Alicia. Should he help her find a place to stay or not? Old Man Hill across the street had closed the doors of his cobbler shop five years ago and was living upstairs. The shop below was deserted and even held a room in the back. Gabe thought that Hill would even rent Alicia the shop and the room at a good fare. But still, Gabe didn't want to tell her about it yet. He didn't like the thought of having her live so close. Branhe had hinted at her importance, but what could he do with cryptic comments?

Of course, Gabe was uncomfortable around women in general, and her beauty made it all the worse. Her soft words whispered in his mind. How strange it was that she was so comfortable with him. Except for Jonas and Will, everyone else treated Gabe with fear and abhorrence.

"See, Will," the poet said, "Gabe's thinking about her, too. Women are evil. She might be a pretty piece of toast, but they're all stale. Trust me, I know whereof I speak. I knew all the great beauties of the Tier of Premye, Queen Keyana included. Women are the bane of peace. Stay away."

The young scholar shook his head, his eyes intense. A twist of envy went through the blacksmith. Will was a handsome young man. Why shouldn't he dote after her? He had probably learned to woo a woman in three languages.

"I cannot stop thinking about her, Jonas," Will Valeri muttered in his cup. He took another deep swallow. "Aster help me, but I cannot."

To be continued in the April 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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Continued from page 24
probably got a kickback.

Coss wiped his forehead again. Conditions among Federation settlements were near anarchy. Following the massacre at Tartris, the Mhyrnians had declared a "Holy War" on the Federationist infidels. Coss could hardly blame them. Vigilantes had murdered every religious leader they could find in the holy capitol. But it was not that alone that had galvanized Mhyrn. Women and children had been slaughtered along with their men in the horrific bloodbath. It was the final blow. The Federation had been bleeding the world of its ultra-rare pluridium for centuries while the poverty-stricken natives lived on in a virtual Bronze Age, and no one cared.

Smoke plumes from burning colonies spread across the horizon. The spaceport was jammed. Only RoseStar, the capitol of Federation interests, persisted in smug arrogance beyond the reach of the Mhyrnians. Apparently, some of the city fathers had long ago foreseen this day, for they had encased RoseStar in a massive bubble of triple polarized Glassteel. The cost had been ridiculously absurd--prohibitive many times over on any other world. But here it had been built, and it could resist multiple, point-blank anti-matter detonations before even *beginning* to weaken. RoseStar had become the city fortress—impregnable and inviolate.

Even after all that had happened across the planet, the investors holding up inside RoseStar were not about to leave. They had typically made trillions a day in profits from pluridium mining. They would just wait. It seemed that besides building the dome as a shield, the governors of RoseStar had also made preparations to withstand a centuries-long siege. They could wait--go on about their cavalier lives until the Federation warships arrived to set things right. No, the money *would* flow once more.

Today's newscasts reported an army of native warriors gathering at the base of domed city. Coss shook his head. What could spears do against triple polarized Glassteel?

So many of Coss' colleagues were dead. His deep grief churned within a black fear that bordered on terror. It made him constantly ill. He had never dreamed such things could ever engulf *him*. Research astro-anthrolopology was a safe profession--wasn't it?

A man jostled him, rushing past. Coss nearly dropped his bags. He clutched the one that held the artifacts, hyperventilating from his unshakeable panic. He clamped his eyes shut for a moment, trying to calm down.

"Hurry. I have to be back at my post in ten minutes."

Coss nodded, swallowing hard. In the last two days he had done things he would have shuddered to imagine not a year earlier.

The trader was confused. At first the machine said it had no cash. Coss tried again. This time it required a retinal scan to release such a high volume. It took three tries before the machine admitted a match. Moments later the cash appeared at the slot. The woman grabbed at it but Coss beat her to it.

"I w . . . w . . . want to make sure I make it through." Coss' voice was trembling. "I'll give you five now and your contact the other fifteen when she clears me and I'm safely away from the spaceport."

"We've been over this before . . ."

"Fine. I'll just find another customs clerk. There . . . there . . . there's no regulation anymore. Everyone's taking bribes all over the place. And you can bet next time I won't be so discreet in sharing what it is I'm trying to g . . . g . . . get off world."

"I see." The woman laughed once. "Very well. I agree."

She took the five thousand.

"Good. How will I know her?" Coss stuffed the rest of the money inside his coat. "How will she know me?"

"Give customs this," she handed him a card. "It's coded with an academic courier flag. My friend is assigned to special cases, so she'll be sure to get you." She twitched her eyebrow. "See you at customs." Before he could answer, she disappeared into the throng.

Coss moved back against the wall, breathing hard--unable to catch his breath. Circling sparkles cluttered his vision. He thought again about turning the artifacts in--but to whom? The objects were invaluable, and not because of their monetary worth. These were unique relics of some super civilization, long forgotten—*machines,* even, from a time far past when the ancestors of these Bronze-Aged Mhyrnians might have ruled the galaxy. If he had translated the hieroglyphs correctly, these artifacts promised answers to the crisis that faced a thousand million worlds: Hypermotility--the terrible stellar catastrophes many felt linked to the astronomical anomaly called Procyx.

Centuries ago, a brilliant star-like object had appeared near the edge of the galaxy. It had shone only coherent light and in only one frequency--pure blue. It had dazzled the scientists of that time and they had tried to study it, but with no spectrum or absorption lines, it had proven impossible. Then, less than a year after its appearance, worlds began to die in a frenzied death that was later named Hypermotility. Space probes sent to study the phenomena had perished in similar demise. The conclusion drawn was that Procyx caused Hypermotility, which caused the death of worlds. Since that time, countless star systems had fallen to Hypermotility and Procyx had grown larger and ever more brilliant. No measurable link could be proven that Procyx was responsible. Nevertheless, perhaps by default alone, Procyx had been blamed, and no end was in sight. Followed to its obvious conclusion, Hypermotility would eventually ruin the entire galaxy—perhaps, even, the entire universe.

But what had drawn Coss' attention was the fact that Procyx had been prophesied eons earlier by Mhyrnian shamans. It was called the *Eye of the Procyx* or the *End Star of Grief*. Casually interested in the coincidence, off-world media had picked up on the name and called it just *Procyx*. The name had stuck.

The Mhyrnian prophecies claimed that Procyx was the "Eye of Echion, the Terrible," demon god of Mhyrn who, though in captivity, could stare out upon the cosmos at the end of all things. The touch of his glance could bring death to worlds—perhaps all worlds, or so the prophecy went. The destructions of Procyx would continue, unstoppable, unless the energies of Zorl, a god of great benevolence and irresistible power, sealed up the cosmos against the deadly view of this Terrible One. The prophecy claimed that nothing but the Powers of Zorl could work against the Procyx--nothing!

Coss resisted the urge to look at the artifacts--to make sure they were still inside his bag, that no one had stolen them since he had last checked. If he could just get them safely off world until he could make contact with the right Mhyrnians, perhaps *they* could use them to unleash these *Powers of Zorl*, whatever they were and if there was such a thing, and stop the ruination of the End Star of Grief.

But who might the *right Mhyrnians* be? Coss had some ideas, but without further research he could not be sure. His plan was to leave until things quieted down and then quietly return and discover whom best to give them to.

A sudden roar outside rattled the windows of the terminal. Coss stumbled to the clear wall. Two squadrons of fully-armed Federation fighters ripped the air in tight formation, heading east toward RoseStar. Around Coss, the momentary lull in conversations caused by the flyover erupted anew, doubled in volume and urgency. People were clamoring, now.

He pushed through them, rude and rough. He had learned to ignore people's outbursts. He shoved his way toward the customs line. There were only three people ahead of him. He tried to make eye contact with the agent he had bribed, but she skillfully avoided him.

The time scraped by with painful slowness.

At last Coss hefted his bags on the counter before the woman.

"Anything to claim?" she asked, bored.

"Nothing," Coss replied, his voice thick. He cleared his throat and wiped his forehead again with his handkerchief.

"Go on through," She didn't even look at his bags.

He took a deep breath that deteriorated into a nervous cough. Taking a hard swallow he moved on into the main concourse. Things were somewhat calmer there. This was the place for the privileged--the ones who had paid their bribes and assured their way to safety. Some people were even snoozing in chairs, waiting for their liner to arrive. Coss went over to an empty seat next to a sleeping evacuee and carefully put his bags down. Again he fought the urge to check the artifacts. Instead he slid down in his seat, at least trying to look relaxed.

This business had been so awful--dismal. He hated the memory of nearly everything he had done over the last few days. It festered in him until he forced himself to stop. No! Better not get into that too deeply, at least not until he had the artifacts safe. He forced himself to close his eyes, feigning sleep. It took several minutes for him to calm his breathing down to something that looked relaxed to a casual observer.

"Excuse me, sir." The voice, while soft, shocked Coss so violently that he jumped. He opened his eyes and squinted at two Federation security men standing in front of him. One of them had his hand on the butt of his depolarizer. Coss swallowed hard and it caught in his throat. He coughed and hacked for nearly a minute before he could talk. His eyes were watering so badly he could hardly see the men's faces.

"We didn't mean to startle you. Please remain calm and come with us."

"I . . . I . . . is something wrong?" Coss asked, while one of the men helped him to his feet. The other man picked up his bags.

"Wow, what have you got in here? Feels like rocks."

"My work," Coss tried to say with a calm voice. "I . . . I study metals. But please, I've been cleared through customs. I haven't . . ."

"Just come this way, sir."

Coss resigned himself to his fate. In a way he felt relieved. Let somebody else try to save the universe. This was just too hard.

They moved down a dark hallway and into a spare office--the kind businesses keep for temporaries. There was a desk and chair, with a second chair opposite it. The two men ushered Coss and his bags inside, then closed the door. He could hear their footsteps stuttering away down the hall. After perhaps a minute he entertained the thought of getting up and leaving. He started to when he heard more footsteps. He quickly moved back to his seat and waited. A moment later the door opened.

Coss caught his breath. It was a Mhyrnian. The tall native walked silently into the room and sat in the chair behind the desk. From the red robes he wore, Coss recognized him as a shaman to one of the priesthoods. He wasn't sure which and inwardly cursed himself for not having paid better attention to such things during the seven years he had lived there. The shaman said nothing. He went directly to the bag that held the artifacts and opened it.

Outside, the roar of another squadron of Federation fighters grumbled up through the building. The shaman seemed not to notice them as he reached in and brought out the stone.

It was about twice the size of a man's hand and made of igneous rock. The shaman turned it over and looked at it from all angles, then placed it on the table. He reached in again and took out the

sphere. It was made of solid pluridium and glinted like lavender-tinted chromium. Its surface was engraved with symbols and hieroglyphs. The Mhyrnian cupped it in both hands and silently bowed his head. For nearly a minute he held the sphere in reverence, his head bowed. At the end he placed it carefully on the table next to the rock.

After a time he turned his violet eyes on Coss.

"You are taking these off world?" his voice was rich and his diction utterly free of Mhyrnian accent. Coss hesitated. To answer yes was admitting to a felony. To deny it would be a joke. He decided to say nothing.

"Please," the Mhyrnian said after the pause grew too long. "I must know what you planned to do with these objects."

"It . . . it doesn't' much matter now, one way or the other," Coss said carefully.

"But it does. The orb--I can understand why you would wish to smuggle out. But why this worthless rock? There is no law against removing igneous rock from Mhyrn. Why the risks and the bribes?"

Coss shook his head.

"Could it be because of this?" the shaman stood up. He closed his eyes in concentration for a moment and then sang and held a single note. It was a tone Coss knew well: "A" above middle "C." After a few seconds, the rock jittered on the table, then lifted into the air as if it were a feather. It turned on its end and hovered steadily for nearly a minute before returning softly, smoothly to the tabletop, exactly where it had been placed. The shaman waited for Coss to reply.

He shrugged finally, like a schoolboy caught in the act. All was lost.

"Where were you planning to take these? You need not fear. I . . . we plan no prosecution. Your work among this people is known. You have treated with respect those things that are sacred to us. I can only assume that you mean well with what you plan for these objects. Is that not so?"

"I am afraid for their safety, yes."

"Why?" The shaman asked, sitting back in his seat.

"These are perilous times. I . . . I do not want them to fall into the hands of those who do not understand their worth."

"Such as?"

"Such as Federationists who care only about their commercial value. The orb alone is worth trillions in new credits."

"And the stone? Who would guess at its secret unless he happened to sing, as I did, the sacred tone that sets it forth?"

"The two must stay together. That I know."

"Yes. It is imperative that they stay together, and that they be here on Mhyrn when the time is right. Without them, all is lost. But I suspect you understand some of that already. Do I speak correctly?"

"I know that they must come to the right people. That they are Mhyrnian in origin suggests that they must remain here, yes. But I have feared for them, so I was going to take them off world until I could find out to whom they should go."

The Mhyrnian sat silently for a time.

"I don't understand," Coss said. "The men who detained me are . . . are Federationists. Do they work for you?"

"They work for the most money. Here and now, we of Mhyrn have the most money. Do not worry. Your secret remains. But I need to know what you planned for these objects."

"I have a friend in Perseus, on Modelk--a former student of mine who has studied things that

are kin to what *I* have studied, though if you asked him he probably wouldn't see how they relate, as yet. I hope to tell him--if I have time. He is absolutely trustworthy. I plan to leave these with him, then return here to find those to whom these artifacts rightfully belong. I would not return until things have settled down enough for me to move about freely and discreetly. I am determined to see these objects safely to their rightful owners."

"What is your friend to do while you are finding the owners? Anything besides keep the objects safe?"

"I hope he will study them from the vantage point of his own expertise. If what I suspect about them is true, these objects have much to do in a specific way--a way that would shock both Federationist and Mhyrnian alike if the truth were known. For safety sake, I wish to say nothing more than this. May I assume you are concerned for their safety as well?"

"You may, brother."

"Who *are* you?"

"My name is Ambylor. You will not see me any more after today, and our conference here must remain a secret.

"I have counsel for you. Proceed with your plan. Take the sacred objects to your friend. He will, indeed, guard them carefully. But do not return here yourself."

"Why? I must find to whom they belong!"

"You must trust me on this. Do not return here. There are potent and devious evils yet hidden on Mhyrn that would take these and use them for far darker purposes than the death of worlds. Such would hesitate at nothing to obtain the information you hold. By the time you had discovered their true nature, it would be too late."

"But I know the answer is here! Surely, *you* must know it!"

"Do not return here. Promise me."

Coss said nothing.

"You *are* determined to return," Ambylor said quietly. "Is this not so?"

"People die from the Eye of the Procyx--each day--they die by the millions! I cannot allow that if the means to halt it is within my grasp!"

"Yes! But all must be done in its season, my brother. I grieve for the multitudes that have perished, truly, but *all* will be lost if matters proceed *out* of their season. I repeat, and I do so strongly: DO NOT RETURN TO MHYRN."

Coss settled back in his seat. He looked down at his clasped hands, the damp handkerchief caught between them. "I promise I will not bring the artifacts back until I know for sure. Beyond that, I cannot wait any longer."

The Mhyrnian sat back and the two men regarded each other. At last Ambylor stood.

"How can I convey this to you? I, too, have limits on what I can reveal. I honor you for your valor and respect the cause of your urgency, but you *must not come back*." He paused, studying Coss' face. After a moment he looked down. "Nevertheless, I pray to the Creator that your way will be kept safe." He looked up again. "You are free to go. I will see to it that you are protected until aboard your starship. Beware at every step until you reach your friend. Once he has the sacred objects, they will be safe from those dark forces that would seek to usurp their power--at least for a season."

"Thank you," Coss stood. He reached his hand out and the Mhyrnian took it. They shook firmly.

"I know you are a Most High Nobleman," Coss said, putting the artifacts back in his bag. "But I do not recognize which priesthood . . ."

"Zorl," Ambylor said. "And remember to tell no one of this meeting. Not one."

Coss nodded and left the room. At the end of the hall the two security men that had brought him

fell in behind him and stayed near by until he boarded the starship bound for Modelk.

The great liner lifted off and drifted across the mountains in its slow climb. Coss gazed out the window at the falling landscape. He would miss Mhyrn's jade-green skies, the breezes at night, fragrant and punctuated with glowing, flying things . . . and the work--the digs left, half finished. What marvels were there left buried that he would never find if he *didn't* come back?

Dusk. Procyx, the deadly "Eye of Echion" glared with searing blue above the eastern horizon. It was beautiful in its coherent purity. Below, in the valley, Coss could see RoseStar. It's bubble flashed reflections from Procyx, like a jewel set among the deep greens of the surrounding rainforest.

What was that? Coss strained to see. Tiny bursts of energy flashed at the base of the city's great blister, dwindling in the shadows of the growing night. Fighting? Coss presumed so. Lights winked on in the city-fortress, boasting their elegance, indifferent to the desperate drama that raged just beyond the limits of their impregnable dome. More Federation fighters cut across the ascent of the liner, pealing in toward the fierce assault that roiled at the edge of the city. They opened fire, raining death on the assailing multitudes below.

Coss pulled away, eyes clamped tight, struggling against the revulsion that clamped at his throat.

Think of something else, he thought. *Anything!*

His mind drifted for a moment, then settled on the events of the day. He opened his eyes again, looking at nothing in particular--the ceiling.

What had happened to him back at the terminal? The Most High Nobleman had sent him on when, by all rights, he should have claimed the artifacts without further discussion? Why?

He remembered how he had found the artifacts, one morning, on the ground outside his tent. It had been dawn and a storm had been brewing in the west. He had thought it especially odd that a tuning fork accompany them, since Mhyrnian technology had never developed tuning forks. Laboring beneath a strange compulsion to keep his discovery a secret, Coss had casually inquired among the workers if they had found anything unusual the night before. No one had found anything. That night, after another average day at the digs, Coss had sat brooding over the objects. Curious, he had struck the fork and seen the stone rise into the air as it had done when Ambylor had sung the identical note back at the terminal.

Wait a minute. Ambylor! The shaman had called himself Ambylor. Coss knew that name! The familiarity of it had struck him even at the terminal, but he had been too nervous to think into it much.

Ambylor was the name of that Most High Nobleman who had died centuries earlier, a martyr to Zorl. Coss knew the history and claims of the religion well. Since his death, this first Ambylor had been canonized *The Resolute*.

A troubling notion began to take root within Coss.

Surely many shamans had been given the Martyr's name as an honored remembrance. There were probably hundreds of shamans named "Ambylor." Coss shook his head, disbelieving. "No." *Ambylor, The Resolute* was dead. His martyrdom was centuries past. It couldn't be.

Relief swept over him, but it was premature. Hadn't all the shamans been murdered at Tartris? Correct. There were no survivors. Yet there remained still another disturbing coincidence.

Subsequent research had revealed to Coss the probable identity of the relics left at his tent door. Just before his death, *Ambylor, The Resolute* had gone to a shrine in search of the very artifacts Coss was smuggling off world. He swallowed hard on a dry throat. How could he have missed *this* connection? Moreover, scriptures, written after the appearance of Procyx, claimed that beyond death, the Martyr now served the Creator as guardian of the sacred relics. They further prophesied

that *Ambylor, The Resolute* himself would restore the sacred objects when the season of their power dawned.

"No, no, no, no," Coss muttered. "What are you thinking?!"

A chill bristled the hairs on the back of his neck. He had to know more! He *would* deliver the artifacts to his former student, Clement Reeber, as Ambylor had approved, but then, he *must* come back here and find the shaman again! How could he not?

The ceiling lit up as if the sun had suddenly leapt back up above the horizon. Coss sat forward and looked back out the window. Below, at the base of RoseStar, a great, brilliant pillar of fire twisted in the twilight. It breached the dome in a blinding golden radiance that was somewhere between fire and lightning. There was a hush aboard the liner. The vortex of glory unraveled into blinding tentacles that sought and found the Federation fighters. At the touch of the golden death, the ships spun wildly to the ground, detonating in violent explosions. Coss strained to see what was happening at the point of the breach. Throngs poured into the city amid the violet flashes of depolarizers. Meanwhile the turbulent, golden energy yanked more fighters from the sky.

The voice of Ambylor spoke softly to him from behind. "DO NOT RETURN TO MHYRN." Shocked, Coss turned to see the Mhyrnian, but found only the faces of other passengers, frozen in horror-tinged awe at the death of the immortal city—its dome breached by a people that had no weapons capable of even scratching it.

After a time, the falling city disappeared in the distance. Breathing dizzily and in quiet, quick gasps born of desperation, Benjamin Coss clutched the bag with the artifacts closer to him.

Procyx Book II
By O.R. Savage

CHAPTER ONE

I
The Artifacts

" . . . And I say there *are* Vanguards!" The student's eyes glared from a reddened face.

Clement Reeber took all of this in stride, as he had many times before. His reply was cool and deliberately calm. "Fine, Jean. You show me one, and I'll believe it."

Jean, the student, hesitated. "I have no control over their comings and goings! I can't make one appear just because *you're* curious about it. You of all people should know the legends."

"Ah," Reeber stood, collecting his papers. "There you have hit at the essence of it: legend.

"Vanguards! Ships of *infinite* power! The problem with all this is that accounts of the Vanguards vary one from another. Some legends say that they burn, always. Others say they are encased in shells of super lightning. The ones who say *that* obviously don't know what electromagnetic pulses do to electronics.

"And what about the *insides* of these ships? There are those who claim that the walls are made of *liquid metal* that you can see through--even *walk* through. Doesn't anyone get *burned* from this molten metal? Some legends say that there are lattice works of light that go on and on and on forever. Hmm. Blinky lights I *might* believe, but spider webs of light that go on and on . . . to where? Infinity? Inside an enclosure? Listen to this one," he said, his voice expanding in drama, "there are great *oceans* within the Vanguards. How big *are* these ships, anyway? But that's nothing! Other legends claim that whole *universes* shine within them--and in different colors! Color-coded galaxies--imagine.

Supermen flying super ships. Ghosts sailing ghost ships. Nothing new about any of this. It's an old, old legend. Its roots go way back.

"See, there's just no understanding of functional purpose behind *any* of these stories--none at all!"

"If you'd just listen . . ."

"*Other* legends claim that a multitude of strange shapes hover inside. They change shape and sing. Well, maybe. It's just that no one seems to know what these strange polygons do *except* sing and change shape. Conflicting accounts claim that there are great, shining towers of varying colors standing beneath an open sky. This one's a bit odd, don't you think? *Open* sky *inside* a starship?

"And the people that drive them!" Reeber's voice grew spooky. "They come and go in flashes of green light. They shine like ghosts that have *fire* for eyes. Ooh. Scary! Supermen flying super ships. Ghosts sailing *ghost* ships. Nothing new about *any* of this. It's an old, *old* legend. Its roots go *way* back.

"So tell me. Where's the *consistency* in all this?" He shrugged a broad shrug. "Utter, hysterical chaos. Everyone has his own idea about the Vanguards."

"Yes, but . . ."

"But nothing! As I said in today's lecture, the Vanguards are nothing more than modern legends born of an interstellar society. The evidence to support this is overwhelming. I have studied *innumerable* records; conducted *hundreds* of interviews. It seems most people say only that they *know* of someone who has either seen or *ridden* a Vanguard. No *firsthand* accounts. 'Inspirational' hearsay at best. Don't you see? *Can't* you see? The records, the stories--*all* vary from one another. It *is* legend!"

"So you *said* . . ."

"I'm sorry if that offends you. *All* the evidence I have collected points unwaveringly *against* the existence of such bizarrely impossible ships!"

The young woman struggled visibly, as if trying to decide whether to play some trump card she thought she had. Reeber waited, suppressing a desire to prod her into using it so that he could shoot it down.

When Jean spoke, her voice trembled. "Have you interviewed anyone who said he was a *crewman* on one?"

Reeber looked over at Dyer, his assistant. The usual amusement he expected to see there was absent. Instead, he saw Dyer staring at the young woman with incredulity, even . . . was it anger?

"Crewman? Well, that *is* a new one."

"Who is this individual?" Dyer's tone was curiously urgent.

"What does it matter?" Reeber gestured dismissal. "I'm sorry, Ms. Urry, but I have so much evidence against the existence of Vanguards that I believe I have more than proven my case. True, a crewman *is* a new variation, but *only* a variation on having ridden one. I'm afraid it's not interesting enough to warrant my interviewing this individual, whoever he or she is."

"Besides," Dyer said, gazing at the student intently. "Don't the legends say that crew members--even *past* crew members *never* reveal themselves?"

Reeber chuckled. "Obviously, this . . . *crewman* hasn't researched the legends well enough to include that in his story. Tell him to choose another myth to be a part of--and research it better if he wants to fool anyone!"

The student yanked her bag off the desk and hurried out of the classroom. Reeber watched her until she was gone.

"She'll drop the class. These Vanguard believers always do after this lecture."

Dyer was quiet for a moment, looking after the student. "And *you're* always too hard on them."

"This is a hard universe! The sooner these idealists realize that the better. You want proof?" He strode over to the window, opening its blinders. Outside it was night. Stars seared too brilliantly. Many were supernovae. Centered among them all was Procyx, the scintillating star of spectral blue. "If there *were* such things as the Vanguards – ships of incredible power, godlike in their strength and weaponry and compassion – why wouldn't they have moved against Procyx? That horror has ruined hundreds of stars and thousands of planets. Why?!"

Dyer was silent.

Reeber turned away from the window. Once, he *had* believed in the Vanguards. Once, as a student in a university, he had fought the battle Jean Urry had just waged with him. Like Jean he had lost. From then on, he had determined that he would champion only those ideas that could be proven by science. At the same time, he would show the folly of everything else, the legends and myths, especially. Jean Urry would hurt for a time, but she would be a better academician in the end.

"A crewman," Reeber turned from the window. "Preposterous." Then doubt twisted inside him like an old enemy. "But what if . . ." he paused, thrilling to the advent of another old nemesis, one he hadn't known in years. Hope barely glimmered in the darkness. He swallowed hard and squelched the familiar surge of answering guilt. He straightened with a huff. Guilt? *Guilt*?! "Give me a break," he muttered to himself.

"What?"

"I said I give her credit for originality, but that's all."

Dyer joined him at the window, looking at Procyx. "You must admit there are things that defy explanation. You have some in your very possession."

"You refer, of course, to the Mhyrnian artifacts Benjamin Coss left with me. I grant you they *are* odd. Their behavior *does* seem like magic. But just because I can't explain their behavior doesn't mean magic is involved."

"Not even the oldest of the Vanguard legends claim magic. You know that."

"The behavior of the Coss artifacts falls under Clarke's Law for technology: the more advanced the technology, the closer to magic that technology seems to the uninitiated. No? Besides, I can hold the artifacts in my hands--study them, examine them--subject them to tests. Not so with the Vanguards. All evidence clearly denies their existence."

"I just think you ought to keep an open mind on the matter."

Reeber looked at Dyer, perplexed. He thought he *did* have an open mind on the matter.

"'There are more things in heaven and earth . . .'"

"Oh, please!" Reeber smiled, holding up his hand. "Don't substitute literature for the scientific method." Dyer shrugged, gathered his things and headed for the door.

"See you tomorrow," Reeber called after him, then closed his briefcase.

The night was cool. Procyx cast a broad shadow before Reeber as he strolled home. The lights of the campus only occasionally overpowered its rich, blue starlight. Reeber's shadow walked ahead of him. He glanced up and saw Jean Urry. Straightening, he made a friendly smile. Now was the time to let the young woman know that being wrong can teach you how to be right. He would show her that he was not attacking her personally, only her scientific methodology.

"Jean? Everything all right?"

The young woman's face flushed, but her answer was controlled. "Yes, professor. Answer me one last thing."

"Of course."

"Explain the Mestrates."

Reeber nodded. "They do seem magical, don't they? There's a lot in the literature about them of late. They *do* possess unusual abilities. But these abilities are repeatable under experimental conditions. We don't understand the physical mechanisms of their gifts--things like mind reading, mechanical symbiosis . . . uh, telekinesis, to name a few. We don't understand the phenomena, but we *can* measure their effects. *They* are real. I know that physicists are trying to correlate the Mestrate phenomenon into current theories of time-space; fit them into physical laws." He chuckled good-naturedly. "A lot of stumbling, though--a lot. I'm afraid we'll need a genius to make a breakthrough in that area. Still, I firmly believe that the day will come when we *will* understand the Mestrate phenomenon, and it will have nothing to do with magic."

Jean nodded unsure, looking at her feet.

Dyer's words about keeping an open mind bit at Reeber. He took a deep breath and waded in. "All right. This crewman of the Vanguard," he almost whispered. "Have you actually met him?"

She hesitated before answering, as if studying Reeber's face. Finally, she nodded. "Yes. He's

my grandfather."

Reeber nodded in silence. He refrained, for the moment, from pursuing any challenge.

"My grandfather was away on assignment nearly all his adult life."

"Many people have careers that . . ."

"He was also a Mestrate."

Reeber waited. He knew of some Mestrates who were in asylums. "What about the 'law' that the crew should never reveal that they have served on a Vanguard?"

Jean looked into his face. "He didn't."

"I don't understand."

She smiled. "If my grandfather was a Mestrate, what does that make me?"

"I see. You say he never *told* you. Did you read it in his mind?"

She nodded.

"So, your Mestrate gift is the ability to read minds?"

Again, Jean nodded.

"You don't mind if I test you?"

"No, sir."

"Very well. What did my assistant Mr. Dyer think about our conversation concerning Vanguards?"

"He believed me. He even told me to 'shut up' in his mind."

"Oh, so now you're telling me he's a Mestrate too?"

Jean shook her head. "No, but I think he knew *I* was one."

"Hmm. All right. Tell me something about myself that only I would know."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you after class. You don't really believe what you teach."

Reeber flushed. "That's preposterous."

"If you would only listen to what I could tell you that I've seen in my grandfather's dreams--memories he's had . . ."

" . . . Of the Vanguards?"

She nodded.

Reeber considered. He *had* proven the young woman's ability to see his innermost feelings, ashamed of them though he was. Still, it could be a fluke--a good guess . . .

"It isn't," Jean answered his thought. "There really are Vanguards."

Reeber was startled. "Then why haven't they moved against Procyx?"

"I don't know."

"Come to my office in the morning--eight o'clock sharp. I want you to tell me everything you can about what your grandfather dreamed or remembered."

"Thank you, professor."

"Don't mistake my interest for belief."

She smiled. "I understand, Professor. Good night."

The rest of the way home, Reeber's thoughts boiled with excitement. This was the first plausible witness he had ever encountered. He knew it was a far cry from actual evidence of the existence of the mythical ships, but it did bear investigation.

When he arrived at home he ate quickly, not thinking much about the food. He had barely completed his third éclair when he realized that he had eaten two of his favorite desserts without enjoying them. He tried in vain to concentrate on the last one. Finally, he gave up and went eagerly to his study. Pulling out his records on the research he had done on Vanguards, he quickly verified his recollection that he had never once interviewed a confessed Mestrate. His excitement doubled. Never

had he had access to a Mestrate who could read minds. Yes, this did bear investigation. It was 2:00 a.m. before he finally fell into a tenuous sleep.

II

The chiming pulled Reeber awake. He fumbled with his robe, staggering bleary-eyed to the door. It was nearly 5:30 in the morning.

"What!?" he growled angrily as he opened the door.

Outside there were two uniformed soldiers. Although their faces were cordial, there was absolutely no doubt that these men meant business.

"Professor Reeber?"

"Yes. What do you want? It's the middle of the night."

"We apologize for the disturbance at this hour, but time is of the essence."

"I repeat--what do you want?" Reeber saw a MERCURY class courier vessel hovering on his front lawn. Its boarding ramp barely touched the ground.

The older of the men handed him a paper. "I am Micah Lansing of Federation Security. By order of the full quorum of Federal Hexibuneralists, we are here to escort you into protective custody."

"What is it? I pay my taxes on time."

The man smiled a little. "Me too. I'm afraid this is a more serious matter." He handed Reeber an envelope.

Reeber felt a thrill of fear wash over him. He thought back to his conversation with Jean Urry. Perhaps they were after him for learning of a former Vanguard crewmember's unwitting indiscretion. He opened the envelope and examined its document. His mouth dried up. He tried to read the words over and over. It was as if it were written in a foreign language. His voice trembled.

"So what have I done? This is a warrant?"

"It is not a civil warrant. It falls beneath martial provisions."

Reeber cleared his throat. "Which provisions? Martial law is not in effect here!"

"Correct, sir, but . . ."

"I have a class one exemption." His voice echoed softly from the house across the street. "It's under Academia."

"As the document states, you are to be taken into protective custody under the terms of the preservation of galactic interests--more specifically in regards to the Procyx crisis."

"What?" Reeber sputtered. His mind was scrambling. "I . . . I have the right of appeal to the local Hexibuneral."

"The warrant is, you will notice, countersigned by all six members of the local Hexibuneral and campus authorities. Your classes will be covered for the remainder of the semester and full pay will continue, plus fifty percent extra for inconvenience."

Reeber sighed, rubbing his stubby fingers through the hair at the back of his head. "I still don't understand . . . What could *I* possibly contribute to solving the Procyx crisis?!"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir."

"Will you come voluntarily?" The question was a blatant threat. It came from the younger soldier standing behind Lansing. His depolarizer buzzed softly, fully armed. Suddenly angry, Reeber slammed the door in their faces.

A few moments passed. The door chimed again.

"Go away," Reeber called through the door. "I have research to do. Surely there must be some mistake."

"No mistake, Professor Reeber." Lansing's muffled answer was controlled and determined. Reeber studied the summons again, finally comprehending. It *was* valid. After a few minutes of reflection, he opened the door again.

"How may we assist you in preparing for departure?" The question came from Lansing. The younger man who had threatened him was nowhere to be seen.

"Have I really no choice in the matter?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Yes sir. You can choose to refuse. However, you may then be held legally responsible for any damages incurred in connection with your refusal."

"What does that mean in plain Interworld?"

"If Hypermotility continues unchecked, you may be charged with willful obstruction, even interference in Federation actions for defense . . ."

"I?" Reeber blanched at this revelation. "I can't possibly imagine what I have . . . "

"You have in your possession certain Mhyrnian artifacts?"

This was too much for Reeber to grasp. He nodded blankly at the security man. "I'll get dressed immediately."

"Very good, sir. I shall bring a gravdollie and safe for the artifacts. You are . . ." he hesitated for a moment as if searching for the right word. " . . . Requested to bring the Mhyrn artifacts with you. We have been informed that they *are* on the premises. Is that true?"

Reeber nodded, somehow not surprised that they should know this. He had only brought them home from his campus lab yesterday.

"If you will show us where they are we will put them in safety."

Reeber led Lansing into his study. He opened his safe.

"Excellent. Now if you'll get dressed . . ."

"Yes, of course." He dressed quickly, packing his bags in a near stupor. At one point, he glanced up to see a security guard standing behind him in the doorway to his bedroom. His depolarizer buzzed at full readiness. The guard ignored him. Instead, he stared at the window to his room.

Reeber emerged. Nearly one hundred security personnel stood guard around his house and three light cruisers hovered only a few hundred meters up. A gravdollie stood next to the ramp and a continuum safe rested on its platform. It hummed audibly and its outline fuzzed beneath a glowing red force field. One of the guards stepped forward, offering to take his bag. Reeber gave it up without discussion.

"We have put copies of your complete research files, your important personal papers and the artifacts in the safe for you, Professor. Now we need you to verify that the Mhyrn artifacts given to your care by Dr. Benjamin Coss are indeed present. If you please, sir."

Reeber nodded once then approached the gravdollie. The force field disappeared, but nothing else happened.

"*You* will need to touch the safe, sir."

Reeber touched it and it sprung open. Within there were his ROM crystals, files of papers and a metal case. Reeber removed the case and one of the other guards, a muscular looking woman, held it for him as he opened it. Inside he saw an orb of polished, lavender pluridium, inscribed with Mhyrnian hieroglyphs and other symbols. A slab of igneous rock, perhaps twenty centimeters square rested beside it.

"These appear to be my files and the Mhyrn artifacts," Reeber said looking up at Lansing.

"You are not sure?"

"Not completely."

"Please explain."

"I will need a tuning fork--one set at exactly 440 cycles per second."

Without hesitation, Lansing produced a tuning fork.

Reeber had ceased being amazed at anything these men and women did. Still, it angered him that so much of his private life was known in such detail. The Federation was supposed to be a free society with unassailable, individual rights including right to privacy. He barely suppressed a boiling desire to argue the point and merely took the tuning fork.

He struck the fork on the edge of the safe harder than he needed to, then held it upright, his hand trembling.

The slab of igneous rock rose into the air and hovered, motionless. Reeber could not resist watching the faces of the security people. Perhaps the greatest incredulity he saw shone on the face of the woman who held the box. She struggled to hold it steady. It was as if holding it motionless might somehow guarantee the rock not falling and breaking. The stone floated for nearly a minute. Then, gracefully, it returned to its exact position in the bottom of the box. Reeber closed the lid, looking over at Lansing.

"This is, indeed, the Coss Stone and the Orb of lights, as it is called."

"Excellent. Thank you, professor." Lansing nodded once at the woman. She returned the box to the safe, closed it and tumbled the combination. It began glowing again in its fuzzed red blur. Under the scrutiny of several other guards, she briskly pushed the safe up the ramp into the courier ship. When she had disappeared, Lansing looked back at Reeber.

"Very good. Unless you have anything further here, Dr. Reeber, we *should* leave."

"There is one thing," Reeber said. "It concerns my life's work."

"Yes?"

"I had set up an important research interview for tomorrow morning. I would very much like my assistant to conduct it in my absence. Might I call him and have tell him what to do? It's important to me."

Lansing did not answer immediately. It was as though he were listening to something--or perhaps reasoning his answer.

"Who is your assistant?"

"Marshall Dyer--he lives here on campus."

Another pause.

"You may place one call to him. For security reasons, we can authorize nothing more. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Thank you," Reeber said excitedly. He started to turn toward his house when a security guard appeared, holding a world-net phone. Lansing smiled.

"We have opened a priority channel for you."

Reeber told the network whom he wanted to call. A moment later, the phone spoke to him. "I am sorry, but Mr. Dyer is off world."

"What?"

"I can trace him for you."

"Please do." Reeber was incredulous. Why should Dyer leave? A moment later, the phone spoke again. "Marshall A. Dyer is off world on Federation security related affairs."

Lansing grabbed the phone. "This is Guardian Level One Micah Lansing. Scan for

confirmation of my identity and clearances."

"Confirmed," the phone said evenly.

"Disclose location of Marshall Dyer, immediately--clearance level Alpha sub-federal Alpha-alpha One."

Another pause.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot reveal that information at this time."

Lansing spat with anger. "Who am I speaking to?"

"Stand by to terminate communication."

The phone connection cut off. Lansing glared at the thing. Then, unexpectedly, his face relaxed. He nodded once.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Reeber. I cannot tell you where your assistant has gone. Is there anyone else you wish to call in his stead?"

" . . . Oh. Well, Uh--yes. A student of mine--a Jean Urry."

Lansing began to fire up the network again, then hesitated. He looked embarrassed. "Sorry. We know of young Urry. She, too, is off world."

"What the blazes is going on here?" Reeber felt all the excitement of discovery he had thrilled to earlier sour into frustration. "I suppose *she* can't be traced either?"

"I know of her disposition, but can say nothing at this time."

"At this time?"

"Perhaps later. Now, we must be going. I am sure you can see we did the best we could to accommodate you, under the circumstances."

After a moment, Reeber found himself nodding yes. Lansing *had* tried to find out about Dyer. But how had he known about Jean Urry without even calling the network?

From above him, the engines of the courier ship began to hum and whine. The perimeter of guards began to close in and Reeber felt Lansing tugging at his elbow.

"Please, Dr. Reeber. We have lingered too long as it is."

Reeber went up into the ship. Behind him a legion of guards poured up the ramp. Force fields glowed to sudden life behind them, multiple layers of them. The guards trotted down the T-shaped hall at the head of the ship's entrance, and the door to the vessel closed solidly.

"This way to the lounge," Lansing said courteously. He led Reeber down and around several winding ramps and hallways until they emerged into a bubble shaped room. It was apparently underslung--beneath the fuselage of the vessel—for a stairway led down into a collection of several small dens ringed with couches. Lansing led Reeber to the foremost den and gestured him to make himself comfortable.

The walls of this domed room were opaque, lit indirectly with pastel hues of greens and blues. No sooner had Reeber sat in the highly relaxing love seat than a steward appeared from behind them and handed Reeber a drink. He nodded appreciation and took a sip. It was a chocolate mael--well made. Very well made. He sipped at it, savoring its rich tang and deep chocolate smoothness. He looked up at the steward, who waited patiently.

"Superb," Reeber said quietly. The steward smiled and nodded once.

"Thank you, sir. I know it is your favorite. Will there be anything else?"

Reeber began to relax--truly relax. He dismissed the young man with a smile. "Maybe a second--when I'm done with this one?"

"It will be my pleasure."

The steward left. As Reeber took another sip of mael, the walls of the lounge disappeared. He was hardly ready for what he saw.

The night side of Perseus fell swiftly beneath them. Perseus: Reeber's home world. It was huge and spectacular. Above deep oceans and emerald-tinged continents, the clouds drifted like intricate webs enshrouded in snowflakes. Tiny constellations of city lights blazed in planetary shadow. An orange light caught his eye. The sun blistered from beyond the limb of the planet. Its brilliance pierced layers of atmosphere, making of the edge of the world a bow of crimson glory.

Suddenly, a Valiant class fighter slid up next to him. It hung close enough for Reeber to see the pilot who glanced over at the ship, then turned away. More of the sleek, chromium fighters swarmed in about the ship. There must have been hundreds of them. Their weapons blisters flashed to blue-white intensity.

"Our escort," Lancing said as a matter of fact. Reeber settled back in his chair again, trying to relax. His heart raced within him at the unspent adrenaline aching in his bloodstream. He began breathing deeply to calm himself. Eventually it worked.

Perseus fell abruptly to a brilliant point of light and disappeared into the glare of its sun. Deep reverberations swelled up from the framework of the ship. The fighters began to lag behind. The nearest stars began to shift and drift backward. They raced past at ever accelerating blurs until it seemed as if the stars were racing flakes of snow driven by a strong, even howling wind. Reeber clutched the arms of the seat, holding his breath.

Abruptly, the walls went opaque.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Reeber." Restful shades of blues and greens returned. "Most people are *fascinated* by our propulsion system. I believe you are the first I have ever seen to have been disturbed by it."

Reeber trembled at the memory of such insane, headlong speed. His mouth was dry. His cold hands shook. All he could see in his mind was the riotous star blizzard underscored by primal fear of plunging directly into one of them. He merely stared for a moment and shook his head slightly.

"Here," Lancing held out another chocolate mael. Reeber sipped it without tasting. When he noticed its flavor, he closed his eyes, struggling at the brink of nausea. Retching threatened him seriously for a moment, but then subsided.

They had not struck a star! Not yet. Perhaps they were safe after all.

"Are you going to be all right?"

Reeber nodded. He sipped at his drink again. It began to taste good. His mortal fear drifted toward anger.

"You people are supposed to know everything! Why the hell didn't you warn me? I have a long history of motion sickness!"

Lancing looked suddenly embarrassed.

"You didn't know?" Reeber asked.

He shook his head. "You've never had it repaired?"

"I don't believe in all this genetic tampering that's all the rage these days, and I certainly don't need any psyche meddling!"

"Motion sickness. I'm sorry. I didn't know . . . I . . . "

The irony hit Reeber suddenly. He began to chuckle. Of all the things Federation Security knew of him, it would be *this* fact that eluded them. Now, they had not only torn him from his home and work, but they had managed to terrify him as well. He laughed openly and took a deep swig of his chocolate mael. Shaking his head, he realized that they had now found *that* out as well.

Lancing looked terribly uneasy. Good, Reeber decided. Let him squirm a bit.

"Our drive system is not standard P-Q-I," Lancing blurted out, apparently trying to salvage some degree of composure. He had obviously never dealt with Reeber's kind of problem before.

"I gathered that," Reeber said almost caustically--smiling. He was ashamed to admit that he was enjoying this twist of events.

"It is a powerful propulsion system--reserved for a select few vessels in the vast fleets of Federation Command."

Reeber sipped on his drink again, waiting silently.

"It's called *White Drive*. We can circumvent the Galaxy in days--a journey that would take months to years with conventional propulsion systems."

"Why *White Drive*?" Reeber asked, guilt finally blunting his sarcasm.

Lancing laughed. "I should have thought *that* would be obvious."

Reeber puzzled for a moment, then understood. The stars looked like driving snow, and snow had always been an epitome of the color white.

III

Reeber had never doubted that in the Coss artifacts he possessed a rather startling discovery. He had been content to keep them safe until Ben Coss came back for them. But when the Mhyrnologist had died suddenly, Reeber had been left with a dilemma. What to do with them? Coss had made him promise to show them to no one, under any circumstances. He had argued past the point of obsession that they were too valuable for *just anyone* to have. When Reeber had seen the pluridium orb, he had assumed Coss had referred to their monetary value. Now it was obvious he had meant something else. Reluctantly, and not quite knowing what else to do, Reeber had agreed to Coss' stipulations on keeping the artifacts a secret. This he had done faithfully until Dyer had joined him as a teaching assistant. The old academic guilt to study the artifacts had nagged Reeber to the point of telling Dyer, though he had not shown them to him. Reeber kept his promises seriously, even the ones he did not fully agree with.

Thinking back, Reeber puzzled over why he had just let the artifacts sit without doing any of the research Coss had encouraged him to do personally and alone. Reeber was no Mhyrnologist. Why turn them over to him? Reeber shook his head. Surely, the artifacts must be studied. Coss had been dead for years. Surely the best minds in the field should undertake the project, not a Vanguard mythologist.

Only in the last year, to be true to his promise to a dead man, Reeber had decided that he should go ahead with the study himself, and in secret. First he needed to wrap up his most recent work on the origin of star myths, then he would start in on the artifacts. His procrastination had caught up with him. The unique phenomenon had been revealed long before Reeber was ready to evaluate it, let alone share it.

He looked across his dimly lit quarters to the continuum safe. Its edges glowed with the red aura he could not quite focus his eyes on. "Idiot," he muttered under his breath and swung his legs out over the edge of the bed.

The rumbling hum of the White drive throbbed like distant, intoned surf. He sat quietly for a moment, testing his insides for any traces of nausea. Nothing. The nap had done its work.

As he stood, the room's lighting faded on. He scratched at his large belly, then wandered into the bath where he took care of business, showered and shaved. Clean clothes had been laid out for him in his preferred color and style. Even a bottle of his favorite skin-color evener stood on the sink. He smiled without humor and, grunting once, smoothed it on his face, particularly covering the

large, pink birthmark that slashed across his cheek. A moment later it disappeared. Just as he finished dressing, the door chime sounded.

"Come in," Reeber returned to the bedroom. Lansing stepped in, dressed in fatigues.

"Care for some breakfast?"

Reeber *was* hungry. "Certainly."

They headed out and down the corridor. Two security guards fell into step behind them. Reeber stopped and turned.

"Would you excuse us for a moment?" He glanced at Lansing. "Is this really necessary?"

Lansing turned to the two. "Gentlemen? Care to reply?"

"Sir. It is," the guard answered quietly. "Just pretend we're not here. Have a good breakfast."

Reeber looked back at Lansing who waited in silence.

"Gentlemen, I appreciate your need to follow orders," Reeber said evenly. "But I promise you I'm not going anywhere. Do you really have to guard me?"

"I think you misunderstand, sir. We are not here to keep you in. We are here to protect you. It is a privilege."

"W...w...hat?" Off-balanced by genuine courtesy, Reeber found himself stammering. "Privilege? I don't understand."

Lansing finally spoke up. "These men have volunteered to serve as your bodyguard while you are on board. It seems your importance cannot be underestimated, and these men have all but bribed me to have this privilege."

"Privilege? I don't really need . . ." Reeber's confusion transformed suddenly into wonder. "Why?"

"Permission to explain, sir."

Lansing nodded once.

"Dr. Reeber, sir--my family died on Melliskberth. All of them are gone from Hypermotility. When word came that you might have the answer to Hypermotility--that we were to conduct you across the galaxy--I, that is *we* just had to make sure you have the best possible protection. I can say in all humility that's us, sir!"

Reeber was taken completely off guard. For the first time in his life the glib professor who could quip his way out of anything found himself tongue-tied and stammering. He merely faked a smile.

"If there's any chance of stopping this awful destruction . . ."

"Well, yes. I do believe . . . thank you. Yes, very much." He shuffled his feet, looking pointlessly at the floor, then scratched at his beard. At last he looked back at them. "I do promise you," his throat closed in on itself for an instant. "I'll do everything I can." That was all he could think of to say. His hands were clammy. His swallow dried. The enormity of this situation suddenly revealed itself. No wonder Fed Comm had been able to invoke the laws it had. They believed *he* had the answer to Hypermotility! Reeber came to himself. "What's your name?"

"Milo, sir." The answer was stiff, crisp and half shouted. "Guardian Five L. Guantta Milo, sir. Pleased to meet you, sir." His handshake gripped with stony determination.

Reeber shook hands with the other guard. "And you?"

"Pound, sir. G. Four L. Jay Pound."

"Won't you join us for some breakfast?" Reeber smiled.

"You may, gentlemen," Lansing nodded once. They grinned and followed Reeber and Lansing up the ramp into the commissary. Jay Pound paused at the door while Milo followed them.

The domed roof of the commissary displayed a tropical seascape with anviling thunderheads

decorating a royal blue sky. The smell of the ocean was strong and a trade wind rustled palm leaves, carrying more than the fragrances of the sea--flowers and natural perfumes. Reeber took passing note in the lengths to which Fed Comm went to take care of its off duty people, deep in space. He wondered, suddenly, how long he had just slept. He asked Milo.

"'Bout four and a half hours, sir." Milo shadowed Reeber as they went to the buffet. "By White drive I'd say we've traveled around ninety thousand light years in that time."

Reeber's jaw dropped.

"We could have gone many times that speed if we had been able to leave the galaxy." Lansing picked up a tray and started choosing his food. "But that's reserved space."

Reserved? Reeber thought. *Reserved for whom?* "Where are we going?" He took a large cup of a steaming, green liquid. It smelled vaguely like mushrooms.

"Don't know," Milo said proudly. "Fed Comm's remotely guiding the ship. I'd say we're almost there, though."

"If Fed Comm is guiding the ship, how do you know we're almost there?" Reeber took a sip of the mushroom beverage. It was tangy without carbonation, like sweet roots might taste.

"Let me put it this way," Lansing replied. "I'll bet we could take you below to the observation bubble now, without any problems with your stomach."

"Oh," Reeber smiled ruefully.

"I would guess rendezvous within the hour."

"Rendezvous?"

Lansing paused. A strange look crossed his face for a moment. "You'll see."

They ate quietly at the table. Reeber began explaining his most recent research. He had been trying to link the origins of the most ancient star myths with historic fragments surviving the earliest accounts of interstellar expansion. After a time, he noticed that while Lansing seemed interested, Milo struggled to keep from looking bored. Reeber had seen that look a thousand times in his classes.

"Okay," he shrugged around a mouthful of egg and changed the subject toward small talk. The soldier perked up visibly. At length, Milo finished eating and traded places with the other guard.

Halfway through Reeber's second helping of pancakes, a chime sounded. Lansing and the two guards hovered in a trance-like alert as if listening to some private sound.

"We've arrived, Professor," Lansing stood. "The rendezvous point." Both guards turned absolutely professional again. Seeing them this way was curiously comforting to Clement Reeber, who had always held the military in a vague sort of disdain.

"Care to come to the top observation blister?" Lansing gestured toward the door. "I think you will be interested in this, seeing your background is in mythology."

IV

Reeber gawked, puzzled. He gulped the last of his drink and pushed himself away from the table, vaguely troubled at leaving his meal unfinished. He dismissed the feeling and followed Lansing out into the corridor.

They traveled up along ramps that ran throughout the interior of the starship. Excitement bristled everywhere. Reeber's escorts were anxious and alert. They accompanied him through the growing crowd of off-duty personnel that converged on the upper observation bubble with him.

This room was spacious compared to the lounge where Reeber had suffered the ship's unnerving accelerations. People pressed in and more continued to follow.

The domed ceiling was remote, seamless and opaque. A red triangle flashed at zenith. A bar of pure red hovered below the triangle and farther down, the numerals **0110**. Crew excitement was palpable. No one spoke above a whisper.

Abruptly, the dome darkened and disappeared.

Glowing nebulae overwhelmed the deep darkness of space in shining plumes of red and blue framing frozen swirls of gold and white. Searing stars spattered the hanging wisps of interstellar gas and dust, illuminating their mixtures into incandescent thunderheads.

"We're inside a cluster of nebulae for security purposes," Lansing muttered quietly. "No one can see us for light-days in any direction."

Reeber nodded absently.

Against this panorama, two points of light flared like golden novae surrounded by filaments of wandering brilliance. Reeber squinted. They moved, closed and flashed overhead. The walls of the ship sang and resonated in crystalline ringing.

Were they ships--fighters that glowed? Wonder flooded Reeber. The shining points returned more slowly, now very close. They *were* vessels. An inexplicable rush blossomed within Reeber at their approach, a kind of joy whose source he could not explain. It was not unwelcome to a man who had felt truly happy but once or twice in his whole life. Hushed excitement rippled across the crew gathered in the blister. Reeber squinted at the ships in breathless fascination.

It seemed the sleek elegance of these fighters allowed no one to look away. A *halo* clung to each craft like a bubble of light; a stroboscopic, filamentary glory that shifted among varying hues of gold, yellow and amber.

"Two of the Ships of Light," Lansing said quietly.

Reeber turned on him. Ships of Light? *Ships of Light?* It was impossible! The Ships of Light were straight out of the Vanguard myths. Reeber found the glowing vessels again. A hope he had long ago abandoned sparked unrestrained into full blossom once more. Ships of Light!

Then, from the corner of his eye, Reeber saw motion. A dark silhouette drifted across the nebulae. Two more Ships of Light cut across the sky in golden wonder.

Here was irresistible power. It commanded silence, even reverence. The dark silhouette revealed itself a distant vessel. That same *joy* Reeber had felt at the passing of the Ships of Light swelled and deepened in him. Others of the crew nearby must have felt it too, for he heard occasional hushed expressions of amazement. There were even some who struggled beneath deep emotions.

"Vanguard!" Reeber heard someone whisper.

Dazzling red glories flooded the silhouette like liquid radiance churning in convoluting veins of laser-spawned, coherent light. An audible gasp rippled across the crew. The Vanguard, if in fact this leviathan *was* that legendary ship, seemed the source of the powerful emotion Reeber felt. He could not be sure if he had gasped with the others, for his attention was focused unshakably upon the spectacle.

The ship's dazzling, red glories conformed to every surface and bend of the vessel. They seemed captive, crimson fireworks raging unsuccessfully to escape into space. A red-orange halo appeared about the Vanguard. It was akin to that scintillation that had enclosed the Ships of Light. Glowing filaments recessed within its webs of light -- layered multiples of red, red-violet and red-orange lightning-fires. The magnificence of their radiant harmonics surpassed anything Reeber had ever seen.

The Vanguard turned slowly and approached head on. The spoon-shaped nose of the massive vessel passed majestically over head, it's narrowed neck all but glaring with red energies.

Reeber could not begin to guess the Vanguard's length--a kilometer, ten? At last the courier

ship was completely surrounded by the Vanguard's aft, quadrangle framework. Here, the shifting intricacy of color pulsed rhythmically between intense hues of magenta and red. An audible, chorused *hum* pulsed in seeming synchronization to the flowing pathways of light.

Reeber hardly noticed that the members of the crew surrounding him were drawing back. Three points of shining green appeared on the deck beside him. They took human form and coalesced abruptly into three men who stood looking about them. Their gaze fell finally on Reeber.

Lansing stepped forward to greet them. "Gentlemen--welcome. This is Dr. Clement Reeber."

The men from the Vanguard wore the traditional Federation uniforms of blue gray, but the accent color of the uniforms was different from any Reeber had seen before. It was the same hue as the bar of red he had seen below the glowing triangle that had shone on the ceiling.

A Vanguard! Reeber thought. *And here was three of its crew!*

The crewmen stepped forward. The central one, a large black man, extended his hand. Reeber took it, trembling.

"Dr. Reeber, I am Commodore Morse of the Vanguard Cygnus. Thank you for coming under such unfortunate circumstances. I trust you have been well treated?"

All Reeber could do was nod.

"Good. Guardian Lansing? Are the Coss artifacts ready to be transferred along with Dr. Reeber?"

Reeber opened his mouth to answer when he felt a light tap on his shoulder. It was Milo, fully armed. Beside him were his bags and the gravdollie on which rested the glowing safe. Reeber smiled at him then turned nervously back to Morse and nodded.

"Please verify this." Morse said kindly. Reeber looked back at Milo who stood motionless, expression fixed. The request might have seemed an affront to Milo's abilities. Reeber would have taken it that way. But the young guardian showed no reaction. If he *had* been insulted, the man's self discipline was too well harnessed to let it show. Reeber found added admiration for Milo and the other young man that had served as his bodyguards. Their talents to serve required self-discipline – the ultimate qualification for greatness in any field. Some, it seemed, could do it. Others could not, and as Reeber tested himself for any similar degree of excellence, he found himself lacking. The thought sobered him as he knelt and touched the safe. It opened. Lansing produced a tuning fork and Reeber struck it without thinking much about it.

"A" above middle "C" sounded. From the door of the opened safe the slab of igneous rock rose into the air and hovered before Reeber's face. At first, there was only mild interest written on the faces of the Vanguard crew. The slab of rock tumbled to its vertical position.

Suddenly, sparks of golden brilliance flashed sporadically across the expansive interior surface of the Vanguard's aft section. Morse turned to study the display. Racing labyrinths of golden power poured across the surface of the Vanguard, overpowering the former red energies until all the Vanguard's crimson patterns had been swallowed up in gold.

Reeber watched, incredulous. Surprise claimed the faces of Morse and the other crewmen from the Vanguard, and bafflement increased into a depth of wonder.

The slab of rock descended smoothly into its resting position and the Vanguard's tracing patterns of golden energy returned to red.

Reeber's voice cracked. "These are indeed the Mhyrn artifacts."

Commodore Morse continued to stare, stupefied. Suddenly he turned to one of his associates.

"What caused that?" It was spoken calmly--an understatement. But there were overtones of great urgency and concern.

The crewman shook his head. "We don't know. The bridge is in turmoil. Initial ideas point

to a sensory overload--the scanners backing up, perhaps. That's all we can surmise, for now."
The crewman turned to stare with new appreciation at the inconspicuous slab of rock lying in the shadows of the safe. "Whatever power the Mhyrn artifact invokes must be incredible--to be able to manipulate the Vanguard's systems like that."

Morse persisted. "Has anyone asked the Cygnus?"

The crewman nodded.

"And?"

"She says she understands a portion of the message, but that it is not intended for her."

"Message? *A message?*" Morse glared between frustration and puzzlement. Then he laughed once without humor. "A message. And she says she understands it, but it's not for her?"

The crewman nodded.

"What do you suppose *that* means?"

"She will say nothing more on the matter." The crewman shrugged.

Reeber's stomach churned with excitement. Power! *In* the Coss Stone! Power enough to turn a Vanguard! *A Vanguard!* His mind reeled at the thought. All of this was so *very* much to accept in such little time. He had had to dump the attitudes of forty years and return to the hopes and reasonings of his youth. It felt good--marvelously good.

"I'll speak with her when we get back. Dr. Reeber, please seal up the Mhyrn artifacts. Are you prepared to accompany us?"

Reeber nodded, stooping over and touching the safe. Its door closed automatically and the multiple force shields sprang back to life. As he stood up, he looked into Milo's face. Smiling, he extended his hand to the young man.

"If the answer isn't in here," Reeber said after several moments, "I don't know where it *could* be."

"Thank you, Dr. Reeber. Good luck, sir."

The grasp from Milo's hand was firm to the brink of pain. Reeber shook hands with the other guard, then with Lansing.

"I'm sorry for any trouble I caused you back when you came to get me. I had no idea . . ."

"End this madness," was all Lansing said. Reeber nodded once then turned to Commodore Morse.

"I'm ready."

"Bring us over," Morse, said quietly.

Everything turned green, then vanished in an emerald radiance that enclosed Reeber in verdant flames. A moment later, he felt a rush of deeper emotions – a fuller version of the joy he had felt upon first seeing the Ships of Light, but tempered by a kind of soul-filling peace. The two seemed inseparably mingled. They *burned* with an intensity that shone like light at the very center of his chest. Here was some kind of internal *light* that eyes could not see, but was light nonetheless. Its illumination seemed to amplify his being past the confines of his body. It was not pleasure. It rooted well beyond mere physical sensation.

The green brilliance faded away, but the deep emotions that had borne within him continued, unabated.

There was a low, deep rumble.

Reeber stood in a dimly illuminated, cylindrical chamber. Above him, intricacies of red, coherent light drifted among ever-distant depths. It was like looking into a mirror that stood opposite a parallel mirror. The reflections stretched on and on until they were lost in infinity. As he looked down, Reeber saw a similar, shifting web beneath his feet. He felt arms steady him and he looked up

to see Morse reassuring him.

"You see, then?"

Reeber gulped. "I think so . . ."

"Does it seem like we're standing on a floor of red lightning?"

That *was* an accurate description.

Reeber nodded. "You asked if I see them. Doesn't everyone?"

Morse shook his head. "Relatively few. I fear you may find yourself in similar surroundings often here on the Cygnus. Are you all right with it?"

Reeber looked up again at the glories. He nodded. "What do they mean?"

"We're not sure. Except that everyone of Mestrate descent seems able to see them."

"Then I'm a Mestrate?" Reeber was suddenly incredulous.

"Not necessarily. Others have seen them as well, just not many. We'll take your things and the artifacts to your quarters. Gentlemen?" he turned to his associates. They nodded. The wall opened like a receding fluid. The men carried his bags and led the gravdollie with the safe containing the Mhyrn artifacts to some larger space beyond. Reeber craned to see and caught glimpses of red flashings mingled among distant, crimson stars. The walls closed up behind the men.

"Dr. Reeber," Morse said, folding his arms. He looked carefully into his eyes. "Living within a Vanguard is unlike anything you have experienced. Most of the time it will seem as if you are inside the vessel, it's true. But there will be occasions when it will appear that you reside outside, in space itself. Still other times you will experience curious environments--distant, even alien. You will find sensations and perceptions here that may challenge your very sense of reality. It proves disconcerting to most."

Reeber took a deep breath, not really understanding what Morse was talking about, but too ashamed to admit it.

"To minimize disorientation, the Vanguard *can* create an artificial environment--surroundings more closely paralleling natural human experience—if you choose."

"You mean it would mask the true environment."

"Essentially, yes. Many--*many* find life here disconcerting until they are accustomed.

Reeber released a deep sigh. "See, Vanguard mythology . . ." Reeber started to explain, then checked himself, a little embarrassed. "Well, I suppose it's not mythology after all, is it? Still, it is my life's work." He looked upward again at the enthralling intricacies of red energies. Their evolutions were hypnotic.

Morse waited patiently.

"You see, I must not miss this chance. To be on board a Vanguard! Yes, I . . . I really do want to see it as it truly is."

"Of course. But may I suggest taking things in steps—not a grand tour just yet, but say . . . just one area."

Reeber thought for a moment. "The bridge?"

Morse smiled. "Yes. An excellent choice—a logical one."

"The bridge." Reeber nodded, a churning excitement twisting inside him.

Morse walked to the wall. "This way, please."

Reeber stepped carefully across the floor, looking down. Occasional tracers of coherent, red light shot across the polished surface. As Morse approached the wall, it rippled like mercury--a pool of cool, liquid silver disturbed by a falling stone then opened. His heart pounding, Reeber followed after.

Beyond was an enormous concourse that extended into fathomless distance. Towers and

bridges like a city arrayed outward toward a dim remoteness. Bursts of red radiance coursed sporadically along more distant walls made of pure pluridium. These streaks would pause momentarily in their flight to inscribe glowing hieroglyphs or symbols, then plunge onward in complex permutations. Reeber heard what seemed like thousands of voices. They sang words he could not understand in stirring harmonies that explored the full range of hearing. The voices never demanded but ever invited.

Red brilliance flared overhead. Reeber's gaze found a coherent firestorm blossoming among a network of crimson stars that spattered the distant ceiling. An exploding surge of hisses and futzing arcs accompanied the display, sounding sometimes like wind and at others like storm-ravaged oceans.

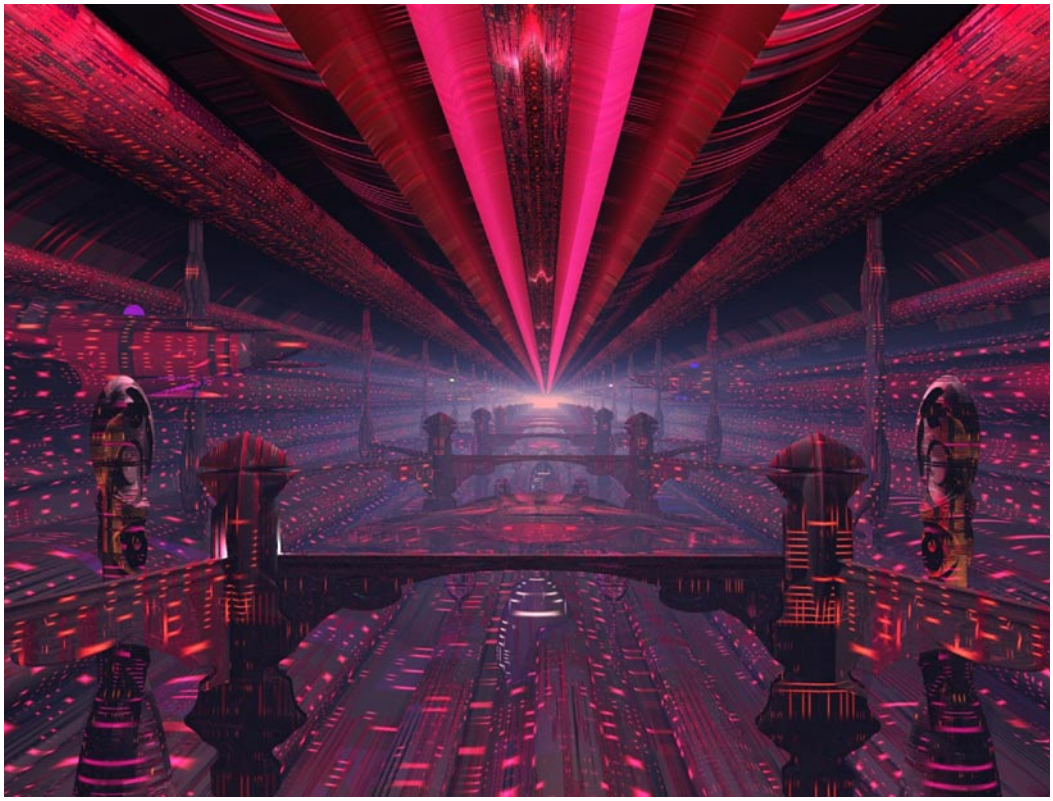
Crystalline, diamond-shaped platforms glided overhead. People rode them. These diamond ships whispered quietly in their passage, their edges pulsing slowly with rose colored light.

"Bridge, this is Commodore Morse. Bring us forward.

That same green of transference that had enshrouded Reeber in his transit from the courier ship enfolded him again. "They come and go in flashes of green light." Reeber muttered, a smile twisting over him. "So it is." He shut his eyes tight until he sensed it fade, then looked.

The bridge of the Cygnus lay before them. It seemed an opening, kilometers across, exposed to a clear night sky. A massive tower stood at the center. No, that wasn't the right description for the structure Reeber saw. Crystalline shapes stacked themselves in an array Reeber knew well: the double helix of the DNA molecule--the foundation of organic life. It sparkled in the scintillating shadings of red Reeber had found dominating the concourse; those same red glories had enshrouded the Vanguard in its approach toward the courier ship.

Laid out in a circle all about this scarlet tower were eleven shorter, double helix towers. But each of these shorter structures glowed and pulsed in its own, intense, coherent color: blue, yellow, green, white, yellow green. There were more. They seemed some magic crown sparkling beneath the stars and nebulae of Reeber's arrival.



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The dazzling Ships of Light screamed across the open heavens. Reeber looked about him as he and Morse moved toward the apex of the central double helix. Behind them, tiny and insignificant, the courier ship fell softly to a speck. Reeber just now noticed that hanging letters floated beside it in the sky, identifying it.

He and Morse stepped onto one of the diamond-shaped

shuttles Reeber had seen drifting among the towers of the concourse. A waist-high, pale, cylindrical aura appeared about them. It came to their waists and thickened, holding them upright in a gentle restraint.

Slowly, the shuttle lifted into the air and slid forward in a gradual climb.

"All decks, prepare for White priorities," a soothing, feminine voice spoke within Reeber's head. Above the horizon, symbols and numbers flowed in stacked rows and columns. The shining, golden Ships of Light eased into docking bays mounted in the massive, rear section of the Cygnus.

"White drive in two minutes," the woman's quiet voice said again. Reeber and Morse glided smoothly among the DNA towers, ascending quickly to the pinnacle of the central double helix.

Floating in the air above them stood a woman whose very gown glowed and flashed scintillating patterns of red radiance. Her hands hovered above a u-shaped crystalline panel suspended in the air before her. They glowed from within as if made of some inner-lit translucent glass. The console wrapped around her at arm's length. She moved her hands quickly above it. Sparks of red radiance leapt continually from her fingertips to varying points on the panel's surface. She paused for a moment to look down at Reeber. Her eyes glowed like the flames of a white-hot fire. Her hair sparkled with searing red highlights. An aura of crimson energies appeared to flash about her head. It was not unlike the halo surrounding the Ships of Light or the Cygnus itself when it had flared in its power.

"They shine like ghosts that have fire for eyes." He said quietly, ashamed and delighted all at once. Here it was—the myths—alive. But the reality far outstripped the stories. What words could ever match what the reality?

The woman turned back to look forward, out across the nose of the Vanguard.

"White drive," the feminine voice said within Reeber's head. A deep rumbling hum reverberated through the fabric of the ship. The crystalline panel that surrounded the floating woman surged to dazzling white.

Stars began rushing by like a blizzard, as they had aboard the courier ship, but here they drove in downward, curved paths.

The Vanguard Cygnus burst suddenly free of the galactic plane.

Reeber turned to see the incredible spiral of the galaxy spread out behind him in incomparable glory. Its nebulae softened the spectacle of a quarter trillion stars. Each blazed in its own special hue of blue or white or gold or pink. Reeber never noticed that the unnerving speeds of White Drive had not affected him here on the Cygnus. He was lost, carefully trying to see Procyx at the galaxy's edge, but there was nothing. Procyx had shone for less than half a millennia. The light from it would not reach here for tens of thousands of years. It was a deceivingly peaceful sight--the galaxy, whole and unmarred by the destructions of Hypermotility.

At peace aboard the Vanguard and watching the galaxy drift slowly beneath like a massive ocean of stars and star fragments, Reeber felt his concerns for finding a solution to the terrors of Hypermotility a near absurdity. What power under heaven could dislodge a galaxy? What power anywhere in the universe could resist the incredible force of the Vanguards?

The feminine voice that answered deep within Reeber was sober, but not scolding.

"And yet all will *perish if Procyx cannot be stopped."*

CHAPTER TWO

Polyphemus
I

Reeber stood just outside his quarters, soaking in the realization of his life's work. As Commodore Morse had warned him, he struggled to understand all he saw.

It seemed the darkness of space hovered above him. Countless stars of reds, magentas and deep oranges painted the deep like brilliant sparks of laser-spun fire. Yet all he saw resided, somehow, within the boundaries of the ship. Galaxies of all types rolled upon infinite distances. The farthest twinkled from well *beyond* the solid, pluridium confines of the massive vessel disappeared at last into remote smudges.

Reeber shook his head in wonder. Diamond shuttles like the one he had ridden on the bridge turned aside here and there from their paths among the Vanguard's red galaxies. Passageways opened before them like rippling pools in the distant walls. Other shuttles emerged, flowing easily into the mainstream of the ship's intergalactic concourse.

Occasionally, the Vanguard's galaxies touched one another with hissing, probing lightnings of red and red orange. At each touch, pure tonalities sounded and held. Reeber mused over this. It was as if as the galaxies were *singing*. The chorus of each shifting galaxy harmonized well with that of its neighbor. The resulting din was symphonic in depth, evoking potent emotion.

"Music of the spheres," he muttered softly, and he listened with his eyes shut. The *music* seemed crafted of human choruses, but over time they migrated gradually among the timbre of strings or bells whose chime had neither strike nor decay. Peace rippled across him, but it was a peace underscored by . . . by what? He opened his eyes again. He surveyed the Vanguard's crimson cosmos with renewed wonder.

Reeber sought to find words that might embody all he felt and sensed for later description. His vocabulary faltered. No intellectually disciplined expression came close to describing the emotionally charged, intangible *power* he experienced so keenly.

He delved finally into the universe of his youth. "Keep it simple, stupid." He laughed. "Tell it like a child would tell it." He let his mind recall the wondering longings Clement Reeber *the child* had felt about the Vanguard mythologies.

He did find a word there. He returned to it over and over, expecting it to lead him to something better. But it grew more, rather than less, appropriate with each, subsequent scrutiny. It *was* a simple, even romantic word. It precisely defined this indefinable majesty. No other description he put to it could approach it for accuracy, so he quit searching.

The word that fit was *goodness*. Here, near the heart of the Vanguard, Reeber felt undeniable, irresistible power for Good.

Swallowing hard to catch his emotions, Reeber returned to his quarters. Undisturbed, his bags waited where they had been left by the crewmen. After spending some time visiting with members of the crew on the bridge, he had been invited to rest some more. So here he was, but he couldn't possibly rest. He strolled slowly toward the panoramic wall opposite his bed and the wide view

revealed beyond.

The core of the galaxy scintillated before the flight of the Vanguard Cygnus. The hub stars bulged majestically above and beneath the galactic plane like great, spattered blisters of golden light. Stellar densities were several times what they were in the spiral arms. The core stars were elderly: red giants and super-giants blazing in golds and pinks, creams and yellows.

A globular cluster lay almost directly ahead. Other stellar companies hung suspended above and beyond the plane of galaxy, floating islands of hundreds of thousands of stars each. They glowed like the shining heads of white dandelions. Their cores tinged toward blues and lavenders. The Cygnus flashed through the outer edges of the nearest cluster. It was like a hurricane-blown squall of luminous snowflakes.

The inner swooping edge of one spiral arm glided beneath the Vanguard. Hundreds of nebulae glowed in sprays of pastel reds, blues, yellows and whites. Young stars glittered amid them like dazzling, hot beacons, proud embers of whites and blues. While aging red super-giants did shine among them, the prevailing hues of the spiral arms were the blues and whites of youth.

Looking at the core stars once more, Reeber could discern a faint shaft of light protruding upward from the very center, extending perpendicular to the plane of the galaxy. It was like a gossamer geyser, frozen in time. Reeber recognized what such a phenomenon meant. An incredibly massive black hole reigned at the center of the galaxy. In the process of dragging gas, dust, worlds, even stars into its inescapable power, the black hole poured prodigious quantities of energy into space.

Reeber recalled the name of this enormously dense black hole. He had learned from the accounts of mariners who plied the stars near the core that it was called Polyphemus. He remembered it because it was a name taken from mythology. He knew of no one who had ever actually seen it due, apparently, to safety concerns. Fear and respect for Polyphemus had edged all of the accounts Reeber had heard. The core stars were remote from where Reeber had spent his life at the outskirts of the galaxy. Even with P-Q-I drive, a journey there could take tens of decades. The core nations, while allied members of the Federation, were like exotic lands, halfway around the world from an ignorant civilization just beginning maritime exploration. Commerce was slow and myth mingled here, too—legends of super structures built among the core stars which took the place of planets, built by lost races for unknown purposes. Reeber believed these claims less than he had the Vanguard myths.

Commodore Morse entered the suite, coming forward to join him at the wide, transparent wall.

Reeber shook his head.

"What is it?" Morse asked quietly. The chorused ambience of the Vanguard sang behind Reeber in the background, sublimated by the rumbling, distant thunders of the vessel's flight.

"That jet of gasses there--protruding from the core." Reeber pointed to it. "It's from the black hole at the center of the galaxy, isn't it?"

"Well, yes and no."

Reeber looked at him, confused.

"What you're seeing *is* a byproduct of Polyphemus—of the *Eye* of Polyphemus, to be more precise."

Reeber knew his mythology well enough to recall who Polyphemus was: the son of Poseidon, god of the oceans. Polyphemus was an incredibly powerful giant--the Cyclops of Homer's Odyssey. To affect the escape of his crew, Odysseus blinded Polyphemus, who had captured them. The eye of Polyphemus was sightless. Reeber said as much to Morse.

"Interesting. I never studied that deeply into ancient mythologies." Together they gazed at the ever-approaching fountain of light.

"But you say Polyphemus is not *exactly* a black hole." Reeber persisted. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"The Eye of Polyphemus is not a single black hole. That emission nebula is not a natural phenomena . . . rather, not the result of a *single* black hole. It attests to energies and cosmological interactions that far exceed our ability to understand them." Morse smiled grimly. "I'm not explaining this very well, am I?"

Reeber looked back at the core stars. The massive bulge of gold and pink stars grew ever wider across his vista. The protruding fountain of hot gasses and light revealed a slight motion. There were flashes barely perceptible within its wispy, intricate fabric.

"Polyphemus is our destination," Morse said. "Once there, you will understand it better, though only on an emotional level. It is difficult to explain in traditional scientific terms." Then Morse laughed, correcting himself. "*Most* of it we don't understand, I'm afraid. You'll just have to wait and see for yourself."

"Forgive me, but you're sounding evasive. We'll be there soon. Why can't you just tell me?"

"I think you would not believe me. Better to see it for yourself."

Another globular cluster flashed past the Cygnus in a sparkling spatter. Reeber puzzled more at the jet of gasses from the Eye of Polyphemus--whatever that was. The delicate threads trailed upward until they dissolved in the depth of intergalactic void. Its wisps dispersed ever wider as they stretched into that ultimate blackness.

Below, the plane of the galaxy swelled up like a gushing tide of fiery snowflakes. It flooded over the ship, and soon the Cygnus was submerged in it. The Vanguard's speed had greatly diminished, for the stars were no longer the blinding blizzard of White drive's maximum maddening rush.

Directly ahead, sculptures of glowing interstellar gas lay scattered like diadems of color and light. They spread into the darkness of space amid great star clusters and fibrous, dark wisps of absorption nebulae. Beyond these black barriers, the stars were so thick they seemed like a solid, textured backdrop.

The Cygnus rolled slowly, approaching the broad curtain of one of these dark nebulae. It swelled until it engulfed the Vanguard. The turbulence of passage could be heard and felt. The ship's unguessable energies countered and swelled in audible response. Occasionally, the dark cloud broke to reveal stellar nurseries. Protostars and proto-planetary systems swirled in their eons-old dance of formation. They glowed in the rose and whites of early stellar life.

The dark nebula fell away and the heart of the galaxy shone unobstructed before the Cygnus.

The golden, rose and cream colored stars of the ancient core stirred among huge clusters of black holes. They fell past the Vanguard in its headlong flight. There were no birthing clouds here. Only the red whirlpools of black hole nebulae or the fragmentary remains of ancient planetary nebulae and supernova skeletons littered the core in smudged fuzziness.

The Cygnus decelerated gradually.

Something didn't look right about the core stars. Reeber could see straight lines and edges. Edges? He squinted, puzzling. Suddenly, his mind reached closure and his jaw dropped. Some sort of titanic object sat enthroned in the midst of the galactic center. Reeber looked upward. The reaching spew of filamentary gasses Morse had called the *byproduct* of the Eye of Polyphemus erupted in its greatest density from a top edge of the mysterious *object*.

The Vanguard penetrated the core. A shell of thousands of neutron stars and black holes flashed quickly past and the dark outline of the colossal object stood revealed. Reeber stepped forward, standing as close to the wall as he could, studying the curious shape that lay ahead.

Countless stars surrounded it. They hovered like super-swarms of fireflies before a mountain.

Then Reeber grasped the scale of this impossible object. He muttered a quiet expletive, watching the gigantic structure draw ever closer.

What single object could be so large? Could it be natural? It had to be! No one had the science to construct such a thing. Whatever it was, he guessed it must be thousands of light years across--perhaps as much as ten thousand light years across.

Remote features resolved upon the faces of its massive silhouette--many facets reflecting the combined starlight of the core. The general shape was that of a colossal, symmetrical polygon. Reeber quickly tried to guess how many sides. Judging from the shape of the face ahead him, he guessed a twelve-sided polygon—a dodecahedron

The Cygnus banked in a wide circle. The ship's destination seemed to be the exact center of one of the sides. Reeber could discern ever more intricate surface detail.

"What is it?" Reeber whispered.

"*That*, sir, is Polyphemus."

"But . . ."

Dully-glowing filaments of gas and dust spat past the Cygnus in gusting sprays and gnarled flashes. Beyond, the expansive surface of Polyphemus sparkled with thousands of tiny twinkles of light.

The approaching face of Polyphemus soon filled the entire panorama.

The twinkling points expanded to grids formed from pathways of light. They reached across the surface of Polyphemus in much the same fashion as the shining displays that had covered the Cygnus when Reeber had first seen her. But these energies were not merely red. They were of varying colors and still appeared very, very distant.

"*Entrance into Polyphemus is imminent,*" the woman's voice whispered within Reeber's head.

"What is this place?" Reeber turned on Morse who had stepped away and returned with a cup of spring water. Reeber downed it in a single swig. He coughed once. "What I mean is 'What is the thing itself?'"

"A structure—a nation of worlds. The seat of power."

"Hmm . . ." *That* seemed deliberate double talk. Reeber took a deep breath to calm him before speaking again. "The straight edges, the gird works there . . . It can't be natural."

"No," Morse shook his head in agreement.

"What *can* you tell me about it?"

"It is the home of the Vanguards."

Reeber waited. When nothing more was forthcoming, he spoke again. "So it *is* a manufactured object. Who under heaven could have so much power and such infinite time as to construct anything a hundredth as ambitious as this?"

Morse shook his head. "Whoever made the Vanguards built this as well."

"To what purpose?"

Morse shook his head once more. "It's been inhabited since before the foundation of the Federation. It's people moved here from core stars that have long since gone to their natural deaths. Beyond this recent history, we know nothing of the original purpose of its construction."

"Come on!" Reeber almost flew off the handle. "You must know more than that!"

"Is the answer to that so very important right now?" the woman's voice within Reeber's head interjected.

"Absolutely! Yes!" Reeber growled out loud. Then, he thought silently, *Who are you, anyway?*

There was a pause.

"I am the Cygnus."

Reeber was incredulous. He had assumed that this voice he had heard ever since coming aboard was a Mestrate they had put on him to watch his thoughts, or perhaps the woman pilot he had seen on the bridge.

"That is not so," the Cygnus spoke to his mind. "*We would not trespass against you."*

But you have trespassed--since the beginning! Reeber thought, a bit angrily.

"I am sorry," the Cygnus replied without conviction. "*I will withdraw, if you choose. It is just that ever since you came aboard, you have yearned to be as close to me as you could. It has been a life-long passion for you, has it not?"*

Reeber walked to a chair that faced the wide, transparent wall. He all but fell into it and didn't even notice Morse leaving him quietly.

"Isn't this true? The Cygnus persisted.

He took a deep breath, looking once more at the approaching patterns of varicolored sparkles dancing across the face of Polyphemus. The displays not only captured the gaze but somehow the heart as well. Reeber knew it was a maudlin attempt to explain the inexplicable, but it was as close to expressing what he felt as he could put into words.

His eyes began to sting beneath the emotional burden of the past twenty-four hours. Moments later, Reeber fell into a shuddering blubber. For several minutes he lost himself in it. Relief and cleansing washed across him. "That's enough," he pulled himself back and took command of himself again. He regarded the approaching structure with a new vitality.

"You need not try to understand everything now," the Cygnus said reassuringly. "*Polyphemus* is *the seat of power, and soon all will seem as natural to you as breathing or sleeping."*

It was enough to accept for now. Once Reeber had resigned himself to that, all the intellectual anguish he had fired at Morse fell into insignificance and the power of Polyphemus flooded over him.

His joy at being aboard the Vanguard had exceeded anything he had ever felt before. When he had finally accepted that, it had afforded him tremendous peace. But, for a time, the impossibility of Polyphemus' existence had pushed that aside. Now that Reeber had embraced the reality of Polyphemus without trying to grasp how it existed or even why, a deeper sense of joy enfolded him.

Reflecting on the phenomenon of the joy itself, Reeber concluded that none of it could have been artificially imposed. This was no phony euphoria. He had easily pushed it away while trying to reconcile Polyphemus' reality against the sciences and facts he had so long embraced as immutable. The discovery that, after all, his sciences really understood very little, had driven him to anger. The next logical step was that his life's work was wrong, insignificant, even begging for ridicule. Anger *was* a natural reaction. Once he had been able to push that anger aside, the Vanguard's influence could be readmitted.

But it seemed there was more. If Polyphemus had been constructed by the Vanguard builders, might it not also project a similar kind of emotional energy? He opened himself to the possibility and felt the slightest, quiet nudge of affirmation. He marveled. To be sensed at this distance, Polyphemus' potential emotional force must be considerable.

Below, Polyphemus' shining grids that earlier had seemed so miniscule grew to magnificence, revealing themselves the arteries of a titanic metropolis. Soaring towers reached spaceward from their setting of glowing thoroughfares reaching far into space. Spectacular lightning leapt among the towers as they moved and shifted slowly, smoothly in some grand purpose. The restless city stretched into remoteness as far as the eye could see. The Cygnus moved among them, then beyond.

Starships drifted past the Vanguard. Fleets of vessels approached and departed a host of gas giants orbiting among the great towers yet far above the surface of Polyphemus. It was at this point that the emotional comprehension of scale finally hit Reeber, for he could, all be it vaguely,

comprehend the size of gas giant planets.

Immediately ahead, a remote dot of coherent, crimson brilliance loomed larger and larger. As the Vanguard fell toward it, a red brilliance wound and sprayed across the floor and walls of Reeber's room. Below, the thoroughfares of Polyphemus flashed in complex, answering flares.

The Vanguard began rumbling, as if its incredible engines had shifted into full reverse. Reeber felt no G-forces, but he could see that the speed of the Cygnus had slowed noticeably.

A chiming drew Reeber's attention behind him. The wall pooled open. Two of the crew of the Cygnus brought the hovering safe that held the Mhyrn artifacts.

A sudden panic flood over Reeber. Must he leave the Cygnus so soon?

Some shuddering ripple of emotional energy stabbed at him. It pierced with such force that he staggered. The crewmen rushed to support him against its irresistible engulfing. Reeber managed to turn his gaze out the window.

A tunnel of light churned before the Vanguard. It seemed fashioned of falling water, cascading from some impossible height. Phosphorescent bursts of red hues pulsed and flashed within it. The emotional shock wave that had struck him near unconsciousness all but thundered through his being. It settled to an enthralling joy. Comprehension flashed through his mind in stroboscopic images while his eyes gazed unwaveringly at the vortex ahead.

Reeber vaguely heard the men speaking. He paid no attention. Visions and dreams danced throughout his mind. They played in a kind of timeless passage, all collected into a twinkling instant.

Worlds convulsed in death, others blazed into life.

He saw an ancient Mhyrnian, a braided beard wrapped about his shoulders. He wore a robe that shone with white brilliance.

A strange square of pluridium, floated in space.

Swirling clouds of color flashed intense lightnings upon a sun-bright, golden Vanguard.

Twelve men and women stood in a circle, their arms raised above their heads. Sparkling storms of energies danced from their fingertips.

Galaxies collapsed.

Impossible explosions stung Reeber's eyes.

A cube of golden stars appeared. They hung in the heavens above a crystalline pyramid built upon a world of incredible beauty. A Vanguard hovered there, flaring in rainbow glories.

He stood above a balcony. The stars of its skies were overwhelming in their radiance. In his hand, Reeber held a book. Two boys stood behind it, lost in a glare of light. The book evoked wonder. Within it there were treasures beyond imagining. The woman hovering beside him urged him toward the darkened room beyond the balcony.

How he loved her!

Battles raged across a billion worlds and over thousands of millennia. He could see the faces of each man woman and child that had lived and died in those wars.

Two men in glaring armor hurled swords of light at a horrifying, black dragon raging within an anti-glory of darkness. Reeber felt the pains of these warriors. He exulted in their joys. Joys? Joys?!

The brilliant star of spectral blue flared into being across ages and eons. In it, Reeber knew fear, sorrow and joy--and sudden understanding.

"Procyx?" he said, incredulous. "Procyx?!"

It is, *the Cygnus replied.*

His hair was white and nearly shining, a young Mhyrnian clothed in robes of scintillating red arose from ruin at the foot of a great mountain. He raised his hands high above his head, consumed as in the midst of lightning-edged, golden fires. Dark fleets fell at the touch of his flames.

Reeber and the Mhyrnian stood in a prison cell. A man in a hooded robe of gray waited beside them. Reeber could not see his face. The Mhyrnian and hooded man gazed upon Reeber in wonder. They waited, bathed in an eerie, tremulous illumination seeming to shine on them from behind him. Reeber handed the hooded man a robe of glowing silver.

Reeber hovered above an alien balcony. The air reeked of horrific storms. Lightnings rippled madly. A hideous demon tore at the neck of a Vanguard crewman as he leapt to fight it. Reeber aimed a singing weapon, intent on destroying the devil. But he could not fire! He hesitated. He panicked. He hesitated . . .

The Mhyrnian lifted his hands. Golden power exploded from them. Its lightnings and flames leapt deep into a fathomless, emerald void to smother Procyx's blinding glory.

Reeber cried out beneath a surge of joy so strong he felt sure it capable of taking his life. Instead, he fell mercifully into a soft, timeless unconsciousness.

I I

Reeber climbed towards wakefulness to the sound of distant waters. Oceans, waterfalls and streams merged somehow into one. He also heard voices but could not discern the words, but he did not wish to wake--not yet. There was safety back below. He yearned to sleep more deeply and tried to drift downward again.

His mind sought after the visions and images that had pushed him into unconsciousness. They had been like incredibly exhilarating dreams, the kind from which one never wishes to awaken. At his desire to see them, they *did* flash by again. They repeated every detail and were accompanied by the rich and deep emotions he had had before. He teetered on the edge of oblivion but could hold back, this time. Instead, he opened his eyes.

A myriad of young, brilliant stars cluttered the dark sky above him. Some were blue-white, most were white.

"Hello?" he muttered.

"He's awake," Morse's voice said quietly. The ceiling went opaque, and lights faded up to reveal a luxurious bedroom with unusual-looking contourmorphic furniture hovering above the floor. Looking around, Reeber saw Morse and two women standing a short distance away. They came quickly to the bed where he lay. The younger of the two women, dressed in a tunic of iridescent green, reached out to touch his forehead with gentle fingertips.

"Pardon me?"

"Lie still, please." She closed her eyes.

"What are you doing?" He waved her hand away.

"Sorry," she heaved a sigh then turned to Morse and the older woman. "I can't see anything unless he remains still!"

"Please, Professor Reeber," Morse said quietly. "This will only take a moment."

Reeber huffed and scowled at the young woman when she turned back to him. A remote part of his mind noted she was attractive. "Why can't you just tell me what you want? Maybe I can help!"

"You couldn't possibly help us with this," the older woman chided. She was elderly, probably well into her second century. Though she looked old, her eyes were clear and cutting. "Just be still. Go ahead, Melana."

"May I?" Melana asked him.

Reeber shrugged. She took a deep breath and lightly touched his forehead and closed her eyes again. After perhaps a minute she withdrew.

"No," she shook her head after a moment. "Now that he's awake I can see his ancestry clearly. He hasn't a drop of Mestrate blood in him."

The others stared incredulous.

"That's impossible." The older woman gawked unabashed at Reeber. Melana withdrew quickly—a little too quickly, Reeber thought.

So I'm just human. It isn't catching!

But he didn't say it. He did look at her. She deliberately avoided eye contact. *Fine!* Who were these women? They seemed not only unconcerned about his collapse, but they also spoke about him as though he weren't even there.

"All right, "The elderly woman finally turned to Reeber. "Tell us. What happened?"

Finally, here was some concern for him. As he thought back upon the delirium, he found it difficult to respond. After a moment's reflection, he began.

"I . . . saw things."

They exchanged glances furtively.

"What things?" the elderly woman's voice was powerful in its energy, though raspy with age.

"I'm fine, now. Thanks very much," he announced sarcastically.

Morse smiled.

"I know that, man," the old woman scolded him. "Tell us what you saw!"

Reeber looked over at Melana. Her expression was neutral.

"Well?"

"I don't understand much of it . . ."

"I didn't ask you for your understanding. I just want to know what you saw!" The old woman seethed visibly. "Curse it, man, why can't you answer a simple question?"

Reeber flushed with anger, mostly at the old bat's attitude.

Then something whispered to him to cooperate. Something historic was going on here. He forced himself to calm.

"Okay," he said quietly, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. He grunted at the effort due to his weight and then sat up. Rubbing his hands together, he began recounting everything he had seen. He expressed his accompanying feelings only vaguely. They didn't need to know that—that was personal. By the time he had finished, half an hour had passed. During his recount, they had not interrupted him. Sometimes Morse nodded with apparent understanding. Occasionally they stared at him in utter amazement.

Reeber finished. A full minute passed before any of them said anything. As Reeber guessed, it was the old woman that spoke first.

"He *must* be a Mestrate. You have to be wrong, Melana."

"May I check again?" she asked. The tone of her voice had softened a trace.

"Be my guest." Reeber held perfectly still while Melana touched his head again and closed her eyes. He could see them moving beneath the lids, as if they were scanning, perhaps searching for something. It looked like she was dreaming. She shook her head finally, opening her eyes.

"Clement Reeber is not a Mestrate!"

The old woman turned away, striding to a wall of curtains. They opened before her, as if of their own volition. A wall-sized window lay beyond. It revealed a vista of night. Reeber craned to see the scene.

Stepped layer upon layer of waterfalls cascaded noisily beneath a moonlit darkness. They streamed in complex walls of varying levels and widths. Occasional washes of phosphor flashed among their foams--pale greens and light blues. Lovely.

An endless sea curved up into the distant haze beyond and above the noisy falls. Its water glistened, reflecting moonlight in fluttering sparkles of current. No horizon could be seen above the highest falls, but well up into the clouds, remote continental coastlines hovered in the haze. They appeared as they might look from orbit, but without planetary limb. Reeber puzzled. How could *that* be? Storm and cloud patterns laced across those distant continents in the sky and city lights twinkled like stars across an endless atmosphere.

Thunder grumbled distantly.

"Where am I" Reeber puzzled. Then, remembering, he answered his own question with an unsure statement. "Polyphemus?"

Morse nodded. "You *are* feeling all right, aren't you?"

Reeber shrugged, then managed an affirmative nod. "I suppose I'm all right. I don't know, however, that I am lucid."

That got their attention.

"What do you mean?" the old woman asked.

"Well, I'm not sure, but I believe I might be hallucinating--right now."

The old woman's expression changed to a look of obvious relief. "Of course, that must be it. What are you hallucinating?"

"I see continents in the sky and waterfalls that . . ."

"That's just Polyphemus," The old woman scowled again. "You're perfectly fine!"

"As the scanners reported," Melana said evenly. "There is nothing wrong with Dr. Reeber!"

"Yes, Melana--as you said before!" the old one growled, then turned to look out at the waterfalls again. Her voice held resignation. "Then it must be that Polyphemus *has* chosen him for something. That is the only explanation I can surmise."

"Agreed," both Morse and Melana replied in near unison.

"But what?" she brooded.

"I should think that would be obvious," Morse went to a kitchenette and poured Reeber a drink.

He brought it over and handed it to him. Reeber accepted it thankfully.

"Obvious?" the old woman sighed. "To you, maybe! Enlighten the rest of us, will you?"

"It probably has to do with the Mhyrn artifacts. To show him such things, Polyphemus must see in Dr. Reeber some special quality. Or perhaps he has a role to play in the future solution to the Hypermotility problem."

"Yes," the old woman came back to the bed. "Perhaps. You *did* record what he said, didn't you?"

Melana nodded. "It's amazing. He's seen things that none of us have. That makes his experience all the more exceptional."

"And distressing," the old woman looked suspiciously at Reeber. "Why should Polyphemus speak this way to a *non-Mestrate?* The Secrets are much too precious to be shared with anyone but Mestrates!"

Morse and Melana turned to stare at the old woman in a shock that quickly turned to embarrassment.

"Isn't that a bit presumptuous, Lady Portia?" Morse said. His voice twisted with a mixture of embarrassment and warning.

"I speak only of the order of things!" the Lady Portia said in defense. "It *has* been the order of things for countless generations. I'm not ashamed of it!"

Reeber struggled beneath an elusive confusion at what was going on. He had long ago accepted the seeming superiority of the Mestrates. All the descendants of the legendary Varn Mestre possessed magic-like gifts. Reeber's resignation to his own lesser abilities had been well seated for decades. He smiled wryly. None of this was new though. Even before Varn Mestre had appeared, the less talented had always had to face limitations in themselves, and they had survived. But when arrogance thrived among the gifted it smacked of elitism, and too often evoked anger from among the "average" majority. It seemed that possessing a great talent could be well tolerated by the average only if modesty shared the greatness. Arrogance invariably stirred envy or self-pity. Neither of these was healthy, let alone easily surrendered.

Reeber felt pitiful. He struggled against a sense of being victimized. They misunderstood him. He felt falsely accused of some unguessable infraction of the Mestrate code—a code that could never be understood by an outsider.

"I don't take well to this, madam," Reeber said angrily.

They all turned. The Lady Portia fumed. Or was she . . . contemptuous? Yes. That was it! She *was* contemptuous of him. As for Morse, he appeared genuinely anxious for Reeber. He couldn't read Melana.

Not one to back away from a confrontation, however outgunned, Reeber persisted.

"Lady Portia," his voice barely remained controlled, "what is your problem with me?"

"She speaks out of turn," Morse said, then turned to the old woman. "I remind you, Lady, that you are but *one* of the Council. I understand your concerns and frustrations. But you are behaving in a manner unfitting your station. If you do not apologize to Dr. Reeber, here and now, I promise you, I will call for a public apology before the full quorum. I have Melana here as a witness."

The Lady Portia paused, took a deep breath, and wrung her hands together. She did not look at Reeber for a full minute, and when she did, her eyes held anything but contrition.

"I apologize, Dr. Reeber." Then she turned defiantly to Commodore Morse. "But before I can allow Dr. Reeber further access to any of Polyphemus' resources, I must have full Council approval."

"That is your right," Morse replied calmly, but his face belied a simmering rage held carefully in check by unwavering self-control.

The Lady Portia looked back at Reeber. Her face wore the look of barely contained desperation.

Or might it be panic? Her voice quivered a shade as she spoke to Morse again.

"No one hears what Polyphemus says but the Mestrates! *No one!"* She turned and blustered out of the room.

An uneasy silence fell at the Lady's departure. It lasted for so long a time that Reeber felt only he could break its hold on them all.

"So, when do we eat?" he said, taking another sip of the nectarine flavored drink. They relaxed. While Morse shook his head, searching for the right words, Melana replied.

"You must understand, Dr. Reeber, that Polyphemus has stood, successfully, under proprietary Mestrate administration for millennia. Polyphemus is nearly power itself, incarnate. It is the home of the Vanguards and the Ships of Light. We do not know, for sure, who created Polyphemus, the Ships of Light, or the Vanguards. But since their discovery, only the combined Mestrates have had the… how shall I put this…the *gifts* necessary to understand everything Polyphemus and the Vanguards require to serve *all* life in the galaxy. Since that day of discovery, a council of Mestrates has governed human activities here with Polyphemus' blessing."

"That is the Council we spoke of," Morse chimed in.

Reeber nodded. "I see."

"Nothing of that order has ever changed until today," Melana continued. "Whenever a new Mestrate enters Polyphemus, he or she has an experience similar to what you have just had. We believe it is some kind of training that Polyphemus conducts. Its like a . . . a *table of contents* for that individual's life . . . or maybe a kind of task sheet that outlines how he or she can best serve the race. It also reveals things. Things of the past, things as they really are, things yet to come."

Melana paused, looking at Reeber who gazed at her, intrigued. She looked quickly at Morse.

"So what *is* Polyphemus?" Reeber changed the subject. "It is this huge structure, I know. But . . .

"We're back to our earlier discussion, and I'm still struggling with this," Morse sighed, perplexed. "Polyphemus is a sovereign intelligence. He is a being of tremendous power and wisdom. But to understand him . . . even we Mestrates, with our special gifts, have never sensed the depth of Polyphemus' wisdom. We cannot even comprehend the extent of the power he is capable of wielding." Morse folded his arms. "But this we know. He directs his power solely in the service of humanity. Do you understand? Polyphemus is still a mystery to us. Even after thousands of years of intimate communications, we still don't understand him. He obeys us, within certain constraints."

Melana rubbed her palms together thoughtfully. " . . . And we obey him. Sometimes we can *see* his vision. Other times we are awe struck at his reasoning. It is far above ours.

"Can you imagine what it's like working with an intelligence who asks things of you that you cannot understand? Sometimes he behaves in ways that seem illogical or irrational. At times he seems almost cruel."

"Is cruelty ever justified?" Reeber asked.

"That depends on your point of view," Melana answered. "Is it cruel for a mother to yank her toddler away from the edge of a cliff? To the child it seems so. That's the kind of *cruelty* I refer to."

"You're saying that humans are nothing more than children?"

"In a lot of ways we are—both humans *and* Mestrates. In most of those same ways, Polyphemus is not."

"You are convinced of Polyphemus' goodness?"

"There are no ulterior motives driving him," Melana replied. "Eons of service and cooperation with humans have proven that."

"*I* am convinced." Morse added with conviction. "He shares the goodness of the Vanguards. They are all unified. Perhaps Polyphemus is even of the same order of life."

Reeber took a deep breath, thinking back to his moment of introduction to the Vanguards. The Cygnus *had* been unmistakably kind and gentle toward him. All the myths were consistent on this point: the Vanguards were a perfection of goodness. Reeber could not deny the unmistakable personal confirmation he shared of that fact. He had not the slightest doubt that the Cygnus maintained unwavering, moral control over unimaginable power.

"I do know of the goodness the Vanguards," Reeber said, his voice edged with emotion. "I cannot say how I know, but I know. While I do not have knowledge of Polyphemus," he looked at Morse. "I believe your words to be true, and I am willing to learn more. I *want* to learn the truth, no matter what it is."

"When you find it," Morse replied. "It will *feel* right. It will seem familiar, as if you vaguely remember it from some remote place where no lies can be told. That's how it feels to me, anyway."

"That's good," Melana said thoughtfully. "That's really good."

Reeber understood it too. It was a marvelous, comforting thing, this notion Morse expressed. He tried standing back, objectively. Here was conviction on the order of religious fervor. He recognized that easily. The encouraging thing about it all was that Reeber could discern nothing of the rote, programmed response one might expect from mental tampering or conditioning. He sighed an inward relief. The hope of the Vanguards still found haven within him.

The three of them carefully studied each other's faces. After a time, Melana smiled. "So, Polyphemus has, at last, spoken to a non-Mestrate."

"Wait a minute," Reeber just now grasped the significance of what had happened. "Let me make sure I understand you. This training experience . . . No one . . . I mean no non-Mestrate has ever had one before?"

"We have many non-Mestrates working here at Polyphemus. In all of time, none of them has ever received the kind of . . ." she sought for the right words " . . . Mestrate training experience you had.

"I'm pleased to see that you understand the implications of this event. When word of this gets out, it will prove a frightening occurrence for many of us. It challenges the status quo--conditions we have held as absolute maxims for millennia. As for me--I think it's exciting! Others, like the Lady Portia, and I mean her no disrespect, may not be able to handle it very well."

"*Especially* the Lady Portia," Morse added.

"Why *especially* her?" Reeber asked, a feeling of excitement contending with his anger at the old woman's blatant bias against non-Mestrates.

"Her position on the Council is directly affected by your experience--even challenged by it."

"How so?

"The Lady Portia hears Polyphemus," Melana continued. "She speaks for Polyphemus. It is *her* Mestrate gift."

"Wait a moment. If she hears Polyphemus, why wouldn't he tell *her* what was going on--unless . . . Doesn't she hear?"

"I can't respond to that in general terms." Melana said. "Apparently, Polyphemus has said nothing to her about any of this."

I I I

Melana remained behind. Commodore Morse, called back to the Cygnus, had disappeared in the shining, green radiance of matter transferal. Reeber joined her out on the terrace.

Here, Reeber gained a fuller view of his surroundings. Great oceans extended beyond the horizon, up into the clouds themselves and far into the distance. All around, no matter where Reeber looked, continents fragmented the ocean's glistening surface. Some stood in daylight. Others reposed in darkness, the lights of their cities twinkling brilliantly. It went on and on, higher and higher while growing fainter with distance. All eventually faded in an infinitely remote haze. Above this, only stars and moons adorned the darkness.

Two large moons glowed in nearby skies. They touched the drifting clouds with silver fringes.

Far to the right, lightning flickered in pale lavenders. Reeber turned to see the Cygnus hovering above the falls. It began a slow rotation while labyrinths of ruby light flowed and coursed across its surface. The sea rumbled from beneath it, churning fountainous rushes of water kilometers into the air. Crimson lightning flashed among them like deep, undersea detonations. A wind whistled up. The foaming surges began spinning upward into a mammoth cyclone of water. The Vanguard waited above it in crimson power. The frenzied waters smoothed into in a perfect cylinder that collapsed suddenly into a whirlpool.

"What's happening?" Reeber shouted above the incessant gale of the winds and shuddering roars of the raging waters.

"The Cygnus is leaving," Melana yelled back three times before Reeber understood and nodded. He looked again at the beautiful ship. A tug of yearning swelled up within him. He desperately wanted the Cygnus to stay. It was all he knew of this strange place.

Red lightnings danced about the edge of the whirlpool in a steady barrage. A monstrous storm spawned about the incredible vessel. The starship seemed unaffected. In fact, it seemed the source of the storm.

The Vanguard began a slow pitch, turning gracefully until it stood on its nose above the eye of the whirlpool. Its dancing webs of red and scarlet raced with purposeful fervency.

The lightnings ceased. The powerful winds died to nothingness. Only the whirlpool stirred and spun, but in utter silence.

A rumbling hum began slowly. It rose in deep, rich power--a soaring climb of pitch. The beauty of its chorus wrenched deeply at Reeber like a symphony. He had heard a version of that sound before, back outside his quarters aboard the Vanguard.

The Cygnus' engines flashed white energies. The great vessel plunged into the whirlpool with such acceleration that it was almost as though it had disappeared. A blast of electrified wind died as quickly as it had surged, and the waters of the whirlpool began to unwind.

Thunder rolled in complex, enthralling acoustical permutations, strangely flanging as they rumbled across the endless sea.

Reeber suffered a troubling loss at the departure of the Vanguard. He took several deep breaths, struggling to hold back yet more irrational tears. From the corner of his eye he could see Melana looking at him. He turned away from her. Walking a few steps, he pulled a handkerchief and wiped his nose. He did not want Melana to see him too closely, though he knew she did. Composed at last he turned back, but she had gone inside. Following, he found her at the kitchenette, helping herself to a drink.

"Hope you don't mind," she put the flask back in the refrigerator. Reeber shook his head.

"Would you care for any?"

"No thanks."

She drank it quickly. "Thank you."

"Can I get you anything else?"

"I'm afraid I really need to go."

"Well, yes. Of course."

"A lot's happened."

"It has." Reeber nodded. It was an uncomfortable moment Reeber knew only too well. Melana couldn't wait to get away, but wanted to be polite. At least she wanted *that*.

"My shuttle's outside."

"I'll be happy to see you out."

"That won't be . . ." she paused. "Okay."

She led the way. Her shuttle waited on the landing pad a short distance from the house. Outside lights came on as they walked toward the ship.

"So what do you do here—at Polyphemus?"

"I have a law practice." She smiled. "A Mestrate practicing law? Sounds unfair? They let me do it." She tapped her right temple with a fingertip. "Can't read minds."

They both laughed.

"You teach mythology?"

Reeber smiled. "Not anymore. I'm back to square one. See, I specialized in Vanguard mythology."

She nodded. He couldn't read her face.

"I used to bunk it. I knew everything. It's a comfortable place to be—knowing everything."

She didn't say anything.

"But now . . ."

The shuttle came to life at their approach. The door opened. She turned, extending her hand. "Well, good luck Dr, Reeber."

"Thank you."

"Is there anything I can have sent over? You're pretty isolated here. That's for security purposes."

"I see. Well, I don't know." He looked up and around. "This *is* an amazing place--Polyphemus. I . . . well, wait. You know, before you go there *is* something I'm curious about—about Polyphemus, I mean."

"I don't know if I know the answer but go ahead and ask."

"Commodore Morse said something about the *Eye* of Polyphemus. What *is* that?"

Melana took a deep breath, folding her arms and hunching her shoulders a little. She stood in silhouette against the glare of the open door and Reeber could only just see her features.

"Okay. At the core of Polyphemus—dead center—is a cluster of black holes, a lot of them. They are terribly powerful. Although no one has been able to find any direct connections, it's believed these black holes -- the Eye -- powers Polyphemus." She fidgeted at the neck of her tunic. "So . . . so these black holes are the Eye," she said quietly, after a moment. "The Eye of Polyphemus."

"Oh," Reeber muttered. "I think I'm beginning to understand. We're standing on the inside of Polyphemus? It's hollow."

Melana nodded. "Pretty much. It's not unlike a Dyson sphere."

"Right. Right! So, back to the Eye of Polyphemus . . ." Reeber said quietly, considering the definition of the black hole clusters she had described. "Yes . . . the eye of the Powerful One who cannot see," he added, as a matter of fact.

"What?" Melana tilted her head a little.

Reeber explained the mythological origin of the name. Then a sudden, frightfully obvious connection broke upon his mind. It was a connection that perhaps only he of all the people might have made. "Of course," he said quietly, then again forcefully. "Of course! The Eye of Polyphemus--

The Eye of the Procyx!"

"I don't . . ."

"Do you know the Mhyrnian myths at all?"

She shook her head.

"Procyx is the eye of the fallen Mhyrnian god Echion. Echion is the Evil One--a giant among evil ones. Imprisoned in outer darkness, Echion would be blind until the end of all things when he would be allowed to look out across the universe to see Zorl's destruction of all the wicked. Zorl's his opposite—a god of limitless good. Anyway, that's the myth."

"I see. This is all very interesting. Please excuse me, Dr. Reeber, I really need to . . ."

"This is incredible!" Reeber didn't hear her. "Procyx, the eye that was blind at the edge of the galaxy, sees . . . while here, at the *center* of the galaxy is Polyphemus--the giant whose sighted eye would be blinded by men so he could not see. That's the myth about Procyx and Polyphemus, respectively. There's a connection here—an irony. This is an incredible irony, don't you think?"

She cleared her throat. "So, what does it mean?"

Mentally, Reeber stepped back for a moment. What *did* it mean? It was true the stories struck at similar themes: sight, comprehension of the universe and what an alteration meant in terms of human welfare. In the Mhyrnian myth, the bestowal of sight to the giant of evil heralded destruction. In the human myth, the blinding of the giant meant salvation.

Had the builders of Polyphemus been trying to symbolize something in naming this wondrous place Polyphemus? The structure even came complete with a single *eye* whose power defied comprehension.

But *was* Polyphemus blind? Were the builders trying to prophesy the way things would be, here, when the terrible days of Procyx should come? How could that be? Of all things that existed in the galaxy, Polyphemus, its Vanguards and Ships of Light held the greatest promise for salvation. Yet they had done nothing against it. Was Polyphemus the governor of the Vanguards? Was he, apparently, blind to it all?

Then Reeber wondered. Were Polyphemus' energies so unilaterally aimed at some internal project that it *was* essentially blind to the destructions that were spreading across the galaxy like a plague? More importantly, could the Eye of Polyphemus be made to *see* the destructions? Yes? No?

But wait.

What if Polyphemus was *supposed* to be oblivious? If the builders *had* been trying to prophecy these times, then perhaps Polyphemus was supposed to be blind now. But where, then, might salvation come from? There was yet another consideration. Prophesying a condition did not condone it. It merely described it. Maybe it was not supposed to be this way. Maybe the prophesying—it there was any—was a warning. That seemed more logical. The symbolism of the myth might be a call to wake up. Could be.

Reeber shared all these thoughts with Melana. It wasn't that he hoped she might suggest some insight. What he told himself was that verbalizing a problem frequently helped in finding a solution. He refused to accept a nagging hint that maybe in suggesting something no one had thought of, he might not come off looking like such a common man after all, not to mention a non-Mestrate.

She thought in silence for a time.

"I don't know, Dr. Reeber. It *is* a striking irony--a parallel of legends. But all I know of Polyphemus suggests otherwise. Polyphemus comes closer to omniscience than anything else I've ever seen. How could it be blind to the destructions that are going on? And further, while I know it is popular to believe that Procyx is causing all the destructions, there's no conclusive evidence of that."

Reeber's hope fell. The importance of the logical connection he had just seen slipped suddenly

away. Still, deep down, Reeber felt the connection had to be more than coincidence.

Then he laughed at himself. Here he was relying now upon *feelings* in trying to piece this puzzle together. This was a classic case of pathological science. And yet, since discovering the order of the Vanguards, Reeber was not nearly so quick to dismiss feelings and hunches.

No, he scolded himself. *Keep an open mind. Don't be swift about dismissing anything. Don't weigh everything by what is popular in science just because it's the prevailing truth. Prevailing truth? By definition, could truth* ever *be altered by time? It was an oxymoron. Talk about pathological science! No, wait and see.*

Reeber readmitted his feelings. He would temper them with reason, reflection and evidence, but he would not dismiss them without consideration.

This was right! The Cygnus, and Polyphemus itself, had taught him things through his feelings. He did not yet understand how it worked. They had shown him that the universe was so much more than he had ever surmised--he, who felt sure that most of the universe was already understood by the popular science of the day.

And yet obscure *myths* had actually been proven to be true! That changed everything. Mythology could no longer be dismissed as pure superstition. Reeber now regarded all of this with considerable care.

"I don't know," he said to Melana, reconsidering the cluster of black holes she had described. "I cannot say whether the Eye of Polyphemus will figure in the destruction of the Eye of the Procyx. But cursed if there doesn't seem to be some sort of symbolic link here--some connection!"

She thought for a moment, then added, "If you're right and the two *are* opposites—adversaries, even, we had better hope Polyphemus *is* the stronger.

" . . . And we'd best act quickly," he said soberly. "The passage of time may tip the scales."

"Rest well, Dr. Reeber." She climbed aboard the shuttle, moving up into the pilot's seat. He watched her, an ever more familiar thought-image flashing through his mind as the door closed amid the climbing whir of the engines.

Again, *He stood above a balcony. The stars of its skies were overwhelming in their radiance. In his hand, Reeber held a book. Two boys stood behind it, lost in a glare of light. The book evoked wonder. Within it there were treasures beyond imagining. The woman hovering beside him urged him toward the darkened room beyond the balcony.*

How he loved her!.

Reeber could see her clearly now. With bewildering clarity he recognized her. The woman was Melana.

To be continued in the April 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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